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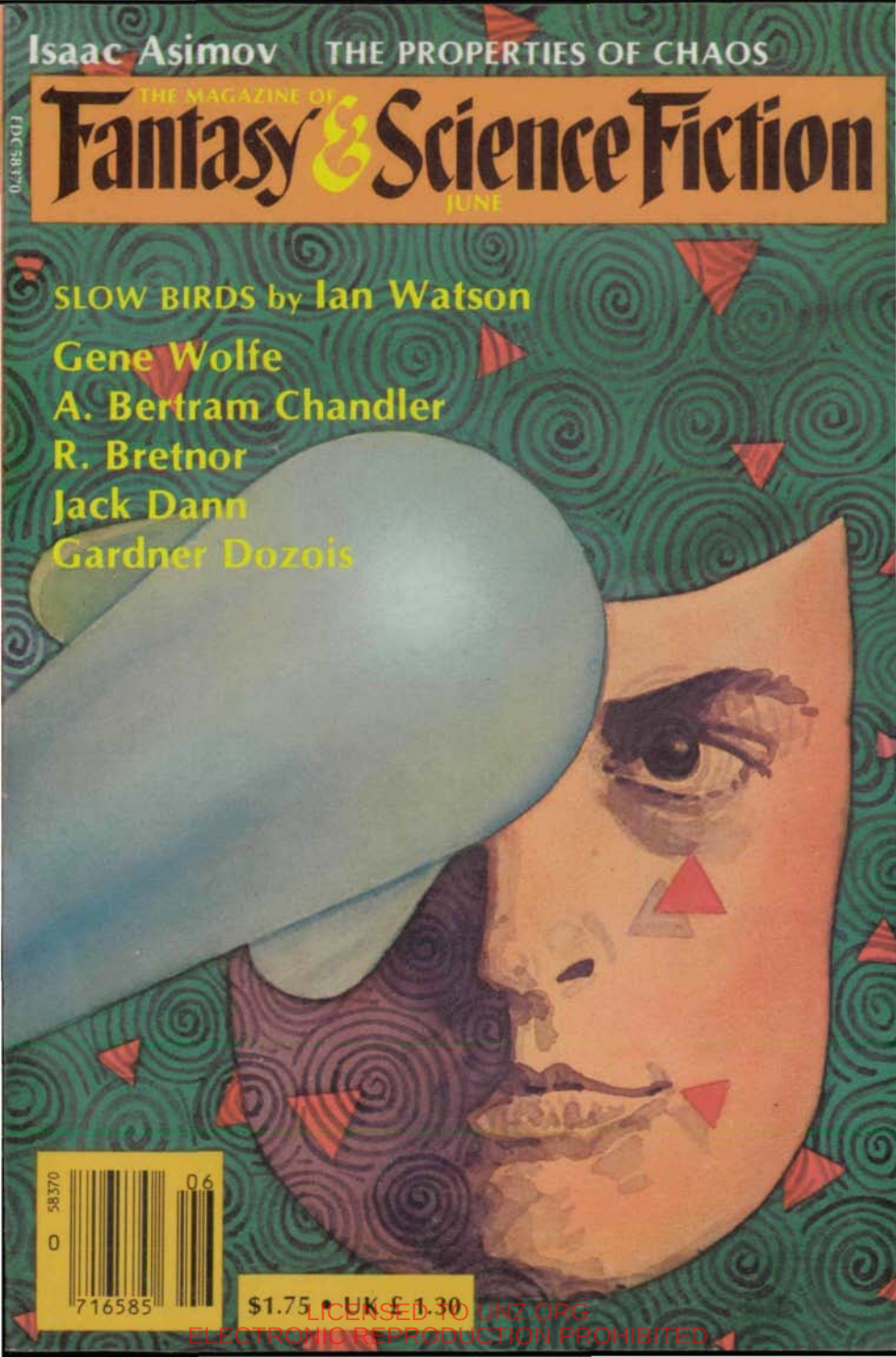
Gardner Dozois



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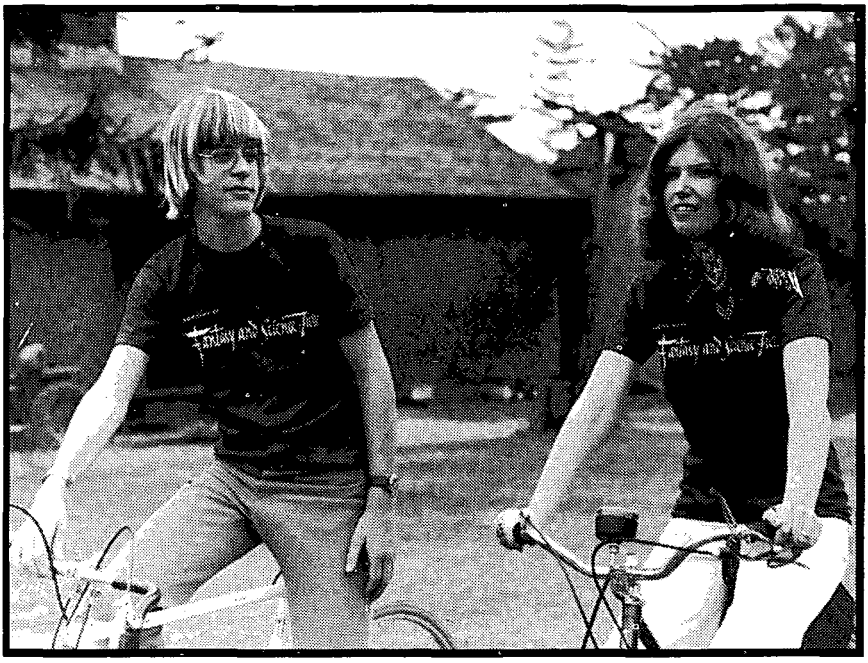

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Ian Watson's new story describes an Earth that is slowly being "glassed" over by the mysterious engines of destruction known as slow birds. At the same time, it is a stirring family drama that spans generations. All this, compressed into a striking novelet that is science fiction at its best.

Slow Birds

BY

IAN WATSON

It was Mayday, and the skate-sailing festival that year was being held at Tuckerton.

By late morning, after the umpires had been out on the glass plain setting red flags around the circuit, cumulous clouds began to fill a previously blue sky, promising ideal conditions for the afternoon's sport. No rain; so that the glass wouldn't be an inch deep in water as last year at Atherton. No dazzling glare to blind the spectators, as the year before that at Buckby. And a breeze verging on brisk without ever becoming fierce: perfect to speed the competitors' sails along without lifting people off their feet and tumbling them, as four years previously at Edgewood when a couple of broken ankles and numerous bruises had been sustained.

After the contest there would be a pig roast; or rather the succulent fruits thereof, for the pig had been turning slowly on its spit these past thirty-six hours. And there would be kegs of Old Codger Ale to be cracked. But right now Jason Babbidge's mind was mainly occupied with checking out his glass-skates and his fine crocus-yellow hand-sail.

As high as a tall man, and of best old silk, only patched in a couple of places, the sail's fore-spar of flexible ash was bent into a bow belly by a strong hemp cord. Jason plucked this thoughtfully like a harpist, testing the tension. Already a fair number of racers were out on the glass, showing off their paces to applause. Tuckerton folk mostly, they were — acting as if they owned the glass hereabouts and knew it more intimately than any visitors could. Not that it was in any way different from the same glass over Atherton way.

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Jason's younger brother Daniel whistled appreciatively as a Tuckerton man carrying purple silk executed perfect circles at speed, his sail shivering as he tacked.

"Just look at him, Jay!"

"What, Bob Marchant? He took a pratfall last year. Where's the use in working up a sweat before the whistle blows?"

By now a couple of sisters from Buckby were out too with matching black sails, skating figure-eights around each other, risking collision by a hair's breadth.

"Go on, Jay," urged young Daniel. "Show 'em."

Contestants from the other villages were starting to flood on to the glass as well, but Jason noticed how Max Tarnover was standing not so far away; merely observing these antics with a wise smile. Master Tarnover of Tuckerton, last year's victor at Atherton despite the drenching spray.... Taking his cue from this, and going one better, Jason ignored events on the glass and surveyed the crowds instead.

He noticed Uncle John Babbidge chatting intently to an Edgewood man over where the silver band was playing; which was hardly the quietest place to talk, so perhaps they were doing business. Meanwhile on the green beyond the band the children of five villages buzzed like flies from hoop-la to skittles to bran tub, to apples in buckets of water. And those grown-ups who weren't intent on the band or the practice runs or on something else, such as gossip, besieged the craft and produce stalls. There must be going on for a thousand people at the festival, and the village beyond looked deserted. Rugs and benches and half-barrels had even been set out near the edge of the glass for the old folk of Tuckerton.

As the band lowered their instruments for a breather after finishing *The Floral Dance*, a bleat of panic cut across the chatter of many voices. A farmer had just vaulted into a tiny sheep-pen where a lamb almost as large as its shorn, protesting dam was ducking beneath her to suckle and hide. Laughing, the farmer hauled it out and hoisted it by its neck and back legs to guess its weight, and maybe win a prize.

And now Jason's mother was threading her way through the crowd, chewing the remnants of a pasty.

"Best of luck, son!" She grinned.

"I've told you, Mum," protested Jason. "It's bad luck to say 'good luck'."

"Oh, luck yourself! What's luck, anyway?" She prodded her Adam's apple as if to press the last piece of meat and potatoes on its way down, though really she was indicating that her throat was bare of any charm or amulet.

"I suppose I'd better make a move." Kicking off his sandals, Jason sat to lace up his skates. With a helping hand from Daniel he rose and stood knock-kneed, blades cutting into the turf

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while the boy hoisted the sail across his shoulders. Jason gripped the leather straps on the bow-string and the spine-spar.

"Okay." He waggled the sail this way and that. "Let's go, then. I won't blow away."

But just as he was about to proceed down on to the glass, out upon the glass less than a hundred yards away a slow bird appeared.

It materialized directly in front of one of the Buckby sisters. Unable to veer, she had no choice but to throw herself backwards. Crying out in frustration, and perhaps hurt by her fall, she skidded underneath the slow bird, sledging supine upon her now snapped and crumpled sail....

They were called slow birds because they flew through the air — at the stately pace of three feet per minute.

They looked a little like birds, too, though only a little. Their tubular metal bodies were rounded at the head and tapering to a finned point at the tail, with two stubby wings midway. Yet these wings could hardly have anything to do with suspending their bulk in the air; the girth of a bird was that of a horse, and its length twice that of a man lying full length. Perhaps those wings controlled orientation or trim.

In colour they were a silvery grey; though this was only the colour of their outer skin, made of a soft metal like lead. Quarter of an inch beneath this coating their inner skins were black and stiff as steel. The noses of the birds were all scored with at least a few scrape marks due to encounters with obstacles down the years; slow birds always kept the same height above ground — underbelly level with a man's shoulders — and they would bank to avoid substantial buildings or mature trees, but any frailer obstructions they would push on through. Hence the individual patterns of scratches. However, a far easier way of telling them apart was by the graffiti carved on so many of their flanks: initials entwined in hearts, dates, place names, fragments of messages. These amply confirmed how very many slow birds there must be in all — something of which people could not otherwise have been totally convinced. For no one could keep track of a single slow bird. After each one had appeared — over hill, down dale, in the middle of a pasture or half way along a village street — it would fly onward slowly for any length of time between an hour and a day, covering any distance between a few score yards and a full mile. And vanish again. To reappear somewhere else unpredictably: far away or close by, maybe long afterwards or maybe soon.

Usually a bird would vanish, to reappear again.

Not always, though. Half a dozen times a year, within the confines of this particular island country, a slow bird would reach its journey's end.

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It would destroy itself, and all the terrain around it for a radius of two and a half miles, fusing the landscape instantly into a sheet of glass. A flat, circular sheet of glass. A polarised, limited zone of annihilation. Scant yards beyond its rim a person might escape unharmed, only being deafened and dazzled temporarily.

Hitherto no slow bird had been known to explode so as to overlap an earlier sheet of glass. Consequently many towns and villages clung close to the borders of what had already been destroyed, and news of a fresh glass plain would cause farms and settlements to spring up there. Even so, the bulk of people still kept fatalistically to the old historic towns. They assumed that a slow bird wouldn't explode in their midst during their own lifetimes. And if it did, what would they know of it? Unless the glass happened merely to bisect a town — in which case, once the weeping and mourning was over, the remaining citizenry could relax and feel secure.

True, in the long term the whole country from coast to coast and from north to south would be a solid sheet of glass. Or perhaps it would merely be a checkerboard, of circles touching circles: a glass mosaic. With what in between? Patches of desert dust, if the climate dried up due to reflections from the glass. Or floodwater, swampland. But that day was still far distant: a hundred years away, two hundred, three. So people didn't worry too much. They had been used to this all their lives long, and their parents before them. Perhaps one day the slow birds would stop coming. And going. And exploding. Just as they had first started, once. Certainly the situation was no different, by all accounts, anywhere else in the world. Only the seas were clear of slow birds. So maybe the human race would have to take to rafts one day. Though by then, with what would they build them? Meanwhile, people got by; and most had long ago given up asking why. For there was no answer.

The girl's sister helped her rise. No bones broken, it seemed. Only an injury to dignity; and to her sail.

The other skaters had all coasted to a halt and were staring resentfully at the bird in their midst. Its belly and sides were almost bare of graffiti; seeing this, a number of youths hastened on to the glass, clutching penknives, rusty nails and such. But an umpire waved them back angrily.

"Shoo! Be off with you!" His gaze seemed to alight on Jason, and for a fatuous moment Jason imagined that it was himself to whom the umpire was about to appeal; but the man called, "Master Tarnover!" instead, and Max Tarnover duck-waddled past then glided out over the glass, to confer.

Presently the umpire cupped his hands. "We're delaying the start for half an hour," he bellowed. "Fair's fair: young lady ought to have a chance to

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fix her sail, seeing as it wasn't her fault."

Jason noted a small crinkle of amusement on Tarnover's face; for now either the other competitors would have to carry on prancing around tiring themselves with extra practice which none of them needed, or else troop off the glass for a recess and lose some psychological edge. In fact almost everyone opted for a break and some refreshments.

"Luck indeed!" snorted Mrs. Babbidge, as Max Tarnover clumped back their way.

Tarnover paused by Jason. "Frankly I'd say her sail's a wreck," he confided. "But what can you do? The Buckby lot would have been bitching on otherwise. 'Oh, she could have won. If she'd had ten minutes to fix it.' Bloody hunk of metal in the way." Tarnover ran a lordly eye over Jason's sail. "What price skill, then?"

Daniel Babbidge regarded Tarnover with a mixture of hero worship and hostile partisanship on his brother's behalf. Jason himself only nodded and said, "Fair enough." He wasn't certain whether Tarnover was acting generously — or with patronizing arrogance. Or did this word in his ear mean that Tarnover actually saw Jason as a valid rival for the silver punch-bowl this year round?

Obviously young Daniel did not regard Jason's response as adequate. He piped up: "So where do *you* think the birds go, Master Tarnover, when they aren't here?"

A good question: quite unanswerable, but Max Tarnover would probably feel obliged to offer an answer if only to maintain his pose of worldly wisdom. Jason warmed to his brother, while Mrs. Babbidge, catching on, cuffed the boy softly.

"Now don't you go wasting Master Tarnover's time. Happen he hasn't given it a moment's thought, all his born days."

"Oh, but I have," Tarnover said.

"Well?" the boy insisted.

"Well ... maybe they don't go anywhere at all."

Mrs. Babbidge chuckled, and Tarnover flushed.

"What I mean is, maybe they just stop being in one place then suddenly they're in the next place."

"If only you could skate like that!" Jason laughed. "Bit slow, though... Everyone would still pass you by at the last moment."

"They must go somewhere," young Dan said doggedly. "Maybe it's somewhere we can't see. Another sort of place, with other people. Maybe it's them that builds the birds."

"Look, freckleface, the birds don't come from Russ, or 'Merica, or anywhere else. So where's this other place?"

"Maybe it's right here, only we can't see it."

"And maybe pigs have wings." Tarnover looked about to march towards the the cider and perry stall; but Mrs. Babbidge interposed herself smartly.

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"Oh, as to that, I'm sure our sow Betsey couldn't fly, wings or no wings. Just hanging in the air like that, and so heavy."

"Weighed a bird recently, have you?"

"They look heavy, Master Tarnover."

Tarnover couldn't quite push his way past Mrs. Babbidge, not with his sail impeding him. He contented himself with staring past her, and muttering, "If we've nothing sensible to say about them, in my opinion it's better to shut up."

"But it isn't better," protested Daniel. "They're blowing the world up. Bit by bit. As though they're at war with us."

Jason felt humorously inventive. "Maybe that's it. Maybe these other people of Dan's are at war with us — only they forgot to mention it. And when they've glassed us all, they'll move in for the holidays. And skate happily for ever more."

"Damn long war, if that's so," growled Tarnover. "Been going on over a century now."

"Maybe that's why the birds fly so slowly," said Daniel. "What if a year to us is like an hour to those people? That's why the birds don't fall. They don't have time to."

Tarnover's expression was almost savage. "And what if the birds come only to punish us for our sins? What if they're simply a miraculous proof—"

"—that the Lord cares about us? And one day He'll forgive us? Oh goodness," and Mrs. Babbidge beamed, "surely you aren't one of *them*? A bright lad like you. Me, I don't even put candles in the window or tie knots in the bedsheets anymore to keep the birds away." She ruffled her younger son's mop of red hair. "Everyone dies sooner or later, Dan. You'll get used to it, when you're properly grown up. When it's time to die, it's time to die."

Tarnover looked furiously put out; though young Daniel also seemed distressed in a different way.

"And when you're thirsty, it's time for a drink!" Spying an opening, and his opportunity, Tarnover sidled quickly around Mrs. Babbidge and strode off. She chuckled as she watched him go.

"That's put a kink in his sail!"

Forty-one other contestants, besides Jason and Tarnover, gathered between the starting flags. Though not the girl who had fallen; despite all best efforts she was out of the race, and sat morosely watching.

Then the Tuckerton umpire blew his whistle, and they were off.

The course was in the shape of a long bloomer loaf. First, it curved gently along the edge of the glass for three quarters of a mile, then bent sharply around in a half circle on to the straight, returning towards Tuckerton. At the end of the straight, another sharp half circle brought it back to the

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starting — and finishing — line. Three circuits in all were to be skate-sailed before the victory whistle blew. Much more than this, and the lag between leaders and stragglers could lead to confusion.

By the first turn Jason was ahead of the rest of the field, and all his practice since last year was paying off. His skates raced over the glass. The breeze thrust him convincingly. As he rounded the end of the loaf, swinging his sail to a new pitch, he noted Max Tarnover hanging back in fourth place. Determined to increase his lead, Jason leaned so close to the flag on the entry to the straight that he almost tipped it. Compensating, he came poorly on to the straight, losing a few yards. By the time Jason swept over the finishing line for the first time, to cheers from Atherton villagers, Tarnover was in third position; though he was making no very strenuous effort to overhaul, Jason realised that Tarnover was simply letting him act as pacemaker.

But a skate-sailing race wasn't the same as a foot-race, where a pacemaker was generally bound to drop back eventually. Jason pressed on. Yet by the second crossing of the line Tarnover was ten yards behind, moving without apparent effort as though he and his sail and the wind and the glass were one. Noting Jason's glance, Tarnover grinned and put on a small burst of speed to push the front-runner to even greater efforts. And as he entered on the final circuit Jason also noted the progress of the slow bird, off to his left, now midway between the long curve and the straight, heading in the general direction of Edgewood. Even the laggards ought to clear the final straight before the thing got in their way, he calculated.

This brief distraction was a mistake: Tarnover was even closer behind him now, his sail pitched at an angle which must have made his wrists ache. Already he was drifting aside to overhaul Jason. And at this moment Jason grasped how he could win: by letting Tarnover think that he was pushing Jason beyond his capacity — so that Tarnover would be fooled into overexerting himself too soon.

"Can't catch me!" Jason called into the wind, guessing that Tarnover would misread this as braggadocio and assume that Jason wasn't really thinking ahead. At the same time Jason slackened his own pace slightly, hoping that his rival would fail to notice, since this was at odds with his own boast. Pretending to look panicked, he let Tarnover overtake — and saw how Tarnover continued to grip his sail strenuously even though he was actually moving a little slower than before. Without realizing it, Tarnover had his angle wrong; he was using unnecessary wrist action.

Tarnover was in the lead now. Immediately all psychological pressure lifted from Jason. With ease and grace he stayed a few yards behind, just where he could benefit from the 'eye'

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of air in Tarnover's wake. And thus he remained till half way down the final straight, feeling like a kestrel hanging in the sky with a mere twitch of its wings before swooping.

He held back; held back. Then suddenly changing the cant of his sail he did swoop — into the lead again.

It was a mistake. It had been a mistake all along. For as Jason sailed past, Tarnover actually laughed. Jerking his brown and orange silk to an easier, more efficient pitch, Tarnover began to pump his legs, skating like a demon. Already he was ahead again. By five yards. By ten. And entering the final curve.

As Jason tried to catch up in the brief time remaining, he knew how he had been fooled; though the knowledge came too late. So cleverly had Tarnover fixed Jason's mind on the stance of the sails, by holding his own in such a way — a way, too, which deliberately created that convenient eye of air — that Jason had quite neglected the contribution of his legs and skates, taking this for granted, failing to monitor it from moment to moment. It only took moments to recover and begin pumping his own legs too, but those few moments were fatal. Jason crossed the finish line one yard behind last year's victor; who was this year's victor too.

As he slid to a halt, bitter with chagrin, Jason was well aware that it was up to him to be gracious in defeat rather than let Tarnover seize that advantage, too.

He called out, loud enough for everyone to hear: "Magnificent, Max! Splendid skating! You really caught me on the hop there."

Tarnover smiled for the benefit of all onlookers.

"What a noisy family you Babbidges are," he said softly; and skated off to be presented with the silver punch-bowl again.

Much later that afternoon, replete with roast pork and awash with Old Codger Ale, Jason was waving an empty beer mug about as he talked to Bob Marchant in the midst of a noisy crowd. Bob, who had fallen so spectacularly the year before. Maybe that was why he had skated diffidently today and been one of the laggards.

The sky was heavily overcast, and daylight too was failing. Soon the homeward trek would have to start.

One of Jason's drinking and skating partners from Atherton, Sam Partridge, thrust his way through.

"Jay! That brother of yours: he's out on the glass. He's scrambled up on the back of the bird. He's riding it."

"What?"

Jason sobered rapidly, and followed Partridge with Bob Marchant tagging along behind.

Sure enough, a couple of hundred yards away in the gloaming Daniel was perched astride the slow bird. His red hair was unmistakable. By now a lot of other people were beginning to take notice and point him out. There were

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some ragged cheers, and a few angry protests.

Jason clutched Partridge's arm. "Somebody must have helped him up. Who was it?"

"Haven't the foggiest. That boy needs a good walloping."

"Daniel *Babbidge!*" Mrs. Babbidge was calling nearby. She too had seen. Cautiously she advanced on to the glass, wary of losing her balance.

Jason and company were soon at her side. "It's all right, Mum," he assured her. "I'll fetch the little ... perisher."

Courteously Bob Marchant offered his arm and escorted Mrs. Babbidge back on the rough ground again. Jason and Partridge stepped flat-foot out across the vitrified surface accompanied by at least a dozen curious spectators.

"Did anyone spot who helped him up?" Jason demanded of them. No one admitted it.

When the group was a good twenty yards from the bird, everyone but Jason halted. Pressing on alone, Jason pitched his voice so that only the boy would hear.

"Slide off," he ordered grimly. "I'll catch you. Right monkey you've made of your mother and me."

"No," whispered Daniel. He clung tight, hands splayed like suckers, knees pressed to the flanks of the bird as though he was a jockey. "I'm going to see where it goes."

"Goes? Hell, I'm not going to waste time arguing. Get down!" Jason gripped an ankle and tugged, but this action only served to pull him up against the bird. Beside Dan's foot a heart with the entwined initials 'ZB' and 'EF' was carved. Turning away, Jason shouted, "Give me a hand, you lot! Come on someone, bunk me up!"

Nobody volunteered, not even Partridge.

"It's won't bite you! There's no harm in touching it. Any kid knows that." Angrily he flat-footed back towards them. "Damn it all, Sam."

So now Partridge did shuffle forward, and a couple of other men too. But then they halted, gaping. Their expression puzzled Jason momentarily — till Sam Partridge gestured; till Jason swung round.

The air behind was empty.

The slow bird had departed suddenly. Taking its rider with it.

Half an hour later only the visitors from Atherton and their hosts remained on Tuckerton green. The Buckby, Edgewood and Hopperton contingents had set off for home. Uncle John was still consoling a snivelling Mrs. Babbidge. Most faces in the surrounding crowd looked sympathetic, though there was a certain air of resentment, too, among some Tuckerton folk that a boy's prank had cast this black shadow over their Mayday festival.

Jason glared wildly around the on-

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lookers. "Did nobody see who helped my brother up?" he cried. "Couldn't very well have got up himself, could he? Where's Max Tarnover? Where is he?"

"You aren't accusing Master Tarnover, by any chance?" growled a beefy farmer with a large wart on his cheek. "Sour grapes, Master Babbidge! Sour grapes is what that sounds like, and we don't like the taste of those here."

"Where is he, dammit?"

Uncle John laid a hand on his nephew's arm. "Jason, lad. Hush. This isn't helping your Mum."

But then the crowd parted, and Tarnover sauntered through, still holding the silver punch-bowl he had won.

"Well, Master Babbidge?" he enquired. "I hear you want a word with me."

"Did you see who helped my brother onto that bird? Well, did you?"

"I didn't see," replied Tarnover coolly.

It had been the wrong question, as Jason at once realized. For if Tarnover had done the deed himself, how could he possibly have watched himself do it?

"Then did you—"

"Hey up," objected the same farmer. "You've asked him, and you've had his answer."

"And I imagine your brother has had his answer too," said Tarnover. "I hope he's well satisfied with it. Naturally I offer my heartfelt sympathies to Mrs. Babbidge. If indeed the boy *has* come to any harm. Can't be sure of that, though, can we?"

"Course we can't!"

Jason tensed, and Uncle John tightened his grip on him. "*No*, lad. There's no use."

It was a sad and quiet long walk homeward that evening for the three remaining Babbidges, though a fair few Atherton folk behind sang blithely and tipsily, nonetheless. Occasionally Jason looked around for Sam Partridge, but Sam Partridge seemed to be successfully avoiding them.

The next day, May the Second, Mrs. Babbidge rallied and declared it to be a "sorting out" day; which meant a day for handling all Daniel's clothes and storybooks and old toys lovingly before setting them to one side out of sight. Jason himself she packed off to his job at the sawmill, with a flea in his ear for hanging around her like a whipped hound.

And as Jason worked at trimming planks that day the same shamed, angry frustrated thoughts skated round and round a single circuit in his head:

'In my book he's a murderer.... You don't give a baby a knife to play with. He was cool as a cucumber afterwards. Not shocked, no. Smug....'

Yet what could be done about it? The bird might have hung around for hours more. Except that it hadn't....

Set out on a quest to find Daniel? But how? And where? Birds dodged around. Here, there and everywhere.

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No rhyme or reason to it. So what a useless quest that would be!

A quest to prove that Dan was alive. And if he were alive, then Tarnover hadn't killed him.

'In my book he's a murderer....' Jason's thoughts churned on impotently. It was like skating with both feet tied together.

Three days later a slow bird was sighted out Edgewood way. Jim Mitchum, the Edgewood thatcher, actually sought Jason out at the sawmill to bring him the news. He'd been coming over to do a job, anyway.

No doubt his visit was an act of kindness, but it filled Jason with guilt quite as much as it boosted his morale. For now he was compelled to go and see for himself, when obviously there was nothing whatever to discover. Downing tools, he hurried home to collect his skates and sail, and sped over the glass to Edgewood.

The bird was still there; but it was a different bird. There was no carved heart with the love-tangled initials 'ZB' and 'EF'.

And four days after that, mention came from Buckby of a bird spotted a few miles west of the village on the main road to Harborough. This time Jason borrowed a horse and rode. But the mention had come late; the bird had flown on a day earlier. Still, he felt obliged to search the area of the sighting for a fallen body or some other sign.

And the week after that a bird vanished only a mile from Atherton itself; this one vanished even as Jason arrived on the scene....

Then one night Jason went down to the Wheatsheaf. It was several weeks, in fact, since he had last been in the alehouse; now he meant to get drunk, at the long bar under the horse brasses.

Sam Partridge, Ned Darrow and Frank Yardley were there boozing; and an hour or so later Ned Darrow was offering beery advice.

"Look, Jay, where's the use in you dashing off every time someone spots a ruddy bird? Keep that up and you'll make a ruddy fool of yourself. And what if a bird pops up in Tuckerton? Bound to happen sooner or later. Going to rush off there too, are you, with your tongue hanging out?"

"All this time you're taking off work," said Frank Yardley. "You'll end up losing the job. Get on living is my advice."

"Don't know about that," said Sam Partridge unexpectedly. "Does seem to me as man ought to get his own back. Supposing Tarnover did do the dirty on the Babbidges—"

"What's there to suppose about it?" Jason broke in angrily.

"Easy on, Jay. I was going to say as Babbidges are Atherton people. So he did the dirty on us all, right?"

"Thanks to some people being a bit slow in their help."

Sam flushed. "Now don't you start attacking everyone right and left. No

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one's perfect. Just remember who your real friends are, that's all."

"Oh, I'll remember, never fear."

Frank inclined an empty glass from side to side. "Right. Whose round is it?"

One thing led to another, and Jason had a thick head the next morning.

In the evening Ned banged on the Babbidge door.

"Bird on the glass, Sam says to tell you," he announced. "How about going for a spin to see it?"

"I seem to recall last night you said I was wasting my time."

"Ay, running around all over the country. But this is just for a spin. Nice evening, like. Mind, if you don't want to bother.... Then we can all have a few jars in the Wheatsheaf afterwards."

The lads must really have missed him over the past few weeks. Quickly Jason collected his skates and sail.

"But what about your supper?" asked his mother. "Sheep's head broth."

"Oh, it'll keep, won't it? I might as well have a pasty or two in the Wheatsheaf."

"Happen it's better you get out and enjoy yourself," she said. "I'm quite content. I've got things to mend."

Twenty minutes later Jason, Sam, and Ned were skimming over the glass two miles out. The sky was crimson with banks of stratus, and a river of gold ran clear along the horizon: foul weather tomorrow, but a glory this evening. The glassy expanse flowed with red and gold reflections: a lake of blood, fire, and molten metal. They did not at first spot the other solitary sail-skater, nor he them, till they were quite close to the slow bird.

Sam noticed first. "Who's that, then?"

The other sail was brown and orange. Jason recognized it easily. "It's Tarnover!"

"Now's your chance to find out, then," said Ned.

"Do you mean that?"

Ned grinned. "Why not? Could be fun. Let's take him."

Pumping their legs, the three sail-skaters sped apart to outflank Tarnover — who spied them and began to turn. All too sharply, though. Or else he may have run into a slick of water on the glass. To Jason's joy Max Tarnover, champion of the five villages, skidded.

They caught him. This done, it didn't take the strength of an ox to stop a skater from going anywhere else, however much he kicked and struggled. But Jason hit Tarnover on the jaw, knocking him senseless.

"What the hell you do that for?" asked Sam, easing Tarnover's fall on the glass.

"How else do we get him up on the bird?"

Sam stared at Jason, then nodded slowly.

* * *

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It hardly proved the easiest operation to hoist a limp and heavy body on to a slowly moving object whilst standing on a slippery surface; but after removing their skates they succeeded. Before too long Tarnover lay sprawled atop, legs dangling. Quickly with his pocket knife Jason cut the hemp cord from Tarnover's sail and bound his ankles together, running the tether tightly underneath the bird.

Presently Tarnover awoke, and struggled groggily erect. He groaned, rocked sideways, recovered his balance.

"Babbidge ... Partridge, Ned Darrow...? What the hell are you up to?"

Jason planted hands on hips. "Oh, we're just playing a little prank, same as you did on my brother Dan. Who's missing now; maybe forever, thanks to you."

"I never—"

"Admit it, then we might cut you down."

"And happen we mightn't," said Ned. "Not till the Wheatsheaf closes. But look on the bright side: happen we might."

Tarnover's legs twitched as he tested the bonds. He winced. "I honestly meant your brother no harm."

Sam smirked. "Nor do we mean you any. Ain't our fault if a bird decides to fly off. Anyway, only been here an hour or so. Could easily be here all night. Right, lads?"

"Right," said Ned. "And I'm thirsty. Race you? Last ones buys?"

"He's admitted he did it," said Jason. "You heard him."

"Look, I'm honestly very sorry if—"

"Shut up," said Sam. "You can stew for a while, seeing as how you've made the Babbidges stew. You can think about how sorry you really are." Partridge hoisted his sail.

It was not exactly how Jason had envisioned his revenge. This seemed like an anti-climax. Yet, to Tarnover no doubt it was serious enough. The champion was sweating slightly ... Jason hoisted his sail, too. Presently the men skated away ... to halt by unspoken agreement a quarter of a mile away. They stared back at Tarnover's little silhouette upon his metal steed.

"Now if it was me," observed Sam, "I'd shuffle myself along till I fell off the front ... Rub you a bit raw, but that's how to do it."

"No need to come back, really," said Ned. "Hey, what's he trying?"

The silhouette had ducked. Perhaps Tarnover had panicked and wasn't thinking clearly, but it *looked* as if he was trying to lean over far enough to unfasten the knot beneath, or free one of his ankles. Suddenly the distant figure inverted itself. It swung right round the bird, and Tarnover's head and chest were hanging upside down, his arms flapping. Or perhaps Tarnover had hoped the cord would snap under his full weight; but snap it did not. And once he was stuck in that position there was no way he could recover himself upright again, or do anything about inching along to the front of the bird.

Ned whistled. "He's messed himself

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up now, and no mistake. He's ruddy crucified himself."

Jason hesitated before saying it: "Maybe we ought to go back? I mean, a man can die hanging upside down too long ... Can't he?" Suddenly the whole episode seemed unclean, unsatisfactory.

"Go back?" Sam Partridge fairly snarled at him. "You were the big mouth last night. And whose idea was it to tie him on the bird? You wanted him taught a lesson, and he's being taught one. We're only trying to oblige you, Jay."

"Yes, I appreciate that."

"You made enough fuss about it. He isn't going to wilt like a bunch of flowers in the time it takes us to swallow a couple of pints."

And so they skated on, back to the Wheatsheaf in Atherton.

At ten thirty, somewhat the worse for wear, the three men spilled out of the alehouse into Sheaf Street. A quarter moon was dodging from rift to rift in the cloudy sky, shedding little light.

"I'm for bed," said Sam. "Let the sod wriggle his way off."

"And who cares if he don't?" said Ned. "That way, nobody'll know. Who wants an enemy for life? Do you, Jay? This way you can get on with things. Happen Tarnover'll bring your brother back from wherever it is." Shouldering his sail and swinging his skates, Ned wandered off up Sheaf Street.

"But," said Jason. He felt as though he had blundered into a midden. There was a reek of sordidness about what had taken place. The memory of Tarnover hanging upside-down had tarnished him.

"But what?" said Sam.

Jason made a show of yawning. "Nothing. See you." And he set off homeward.

But as soon as he was out of sight of Sam he slipped down through Butcher's Row in the direction of the glass alone. It was dark out there with no stars and only an occasional hint of moonlight, yet the breeze was steady and there was nothing to trip over on the glass. The bird wouldn't have moved more than a hundred yards. Jason made good speed.

The slow bird was still there. But Tarnover wasn't with it; its belly was barren of any hanged man.

As Jason skated to a halt, to look closer, figures arose in the darkness from where they had been lying flat upon the glass, covered by their sails. Six figures. Eight. Nine. All had lurked within two or three hundred yards of the bird, though not too close — nor any in the direction of Atherton. They had left a wide corridor open; which now they closed.

As the Tuckerton men moved in on him, Jason stood still, knowing that he had no chance.

Max Tarnover skated up, accompanied by that same beefy farmer with the wart.

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"I did come back for you," began Jason.

The farmer spoke, but not to Jason. "Did he now? That's big of him. Could have saved his time, what with Tim Earnshaw happening along — when Master Tarnover was gone a long time. So what's to be done with him, eh?"

"Tit for tat, I'd say," said another voice.

"Let him go and look for his kid brother," offered a third. "Instead of sending other folk on his errands. What a nerve."

Tarnover himself said nothing; he just stood in the night silently.

So, presently, Jason was raised on to the back of the bird and his feet were tied tightly under it. But his wrists were bound together too, and for good measure the cord was linked through his belt.

Within a few minutes all the skaters had sped away towards Tuckerton.

Jason sat. Remembering Sam's words he tried to inch forward, but with both hands fastened to his waist this proved impossible; he couldn't gain purchase. Besides, he was scared of losing his balance as Tarnover had.

He sat and thought of his mother. Maybe she would grow alarmed when he didn't come home. Maybe she would go out and rouse Uncle John.... And maybe she had gone to bed already.

But maybe she would wake in the night and glance into his room and send help. With fierce concentration he tried to project thoughts and images of himself at her, two miles away.

An hour wore on, then two; or so he supposed from the moving of the moon-crescent. He wished he could slump forward and sleep. That might be best; then he wouldn't know anything. He still felt drunk enough to pass out, even with his face pressed against metal. But he might easily slide to one side or the other in his sleep.

How could his mother survive a double loss? It seemed as though a curse had descended on the Babbidge family. But of course that curse had a human name; and the name was Max Tarnover. So for a while Jason damned him, and imagined retribution by all the villagers of Atherton. A bloody feud. Cottages burnt. Perhaps a rape. Deaths even. No Mayday festival ever again.

But would Sam and Ned speak up? And would Atherton folk be sufficiently incensed, sufficiently willing to destroy the harmony of the five villages in a world where other things were so unsure? Particularly as some less than sympathetic souls might say that Jason, Sam, and Ned had started it all.

Jason was so involved in imagining a future feud between Atherton and Tuckerton that he almost forgot he was astride a slow bird. There was no sense of motion, no feeling of going anywhere. When he recollected where he was, it actually came as a shock.

He was riding a bird.

But for how long?

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It had been around, what, six hours now? A bird could stay for a whole day. In which case he had another eighteen hours left to be rescued in. Or if it only stayed for half a day, that would take him through to morning. Just.

He found himself wondering what was underneath the metal skin of the bird. Something which could turn five miles of landscape into a sheet of glass, certainly. But other things too. Things that let it ignore gravity. Things that let it dodge in and out of existence. A brain of some kind, even?

"Can you hear me, bird?" he asked it. Maybe no one had ever spoken to a slow bird before.

The slow bird did not answer.

Maybe it couldn't, but maybe it could hear him, even so. Maybe it could obey orders.

"Don't disappear with me on your back," he told it. "Stay here. Keep on flying just like this."

But since it was doing just that already, he had no idea whether it was obeying him or not.

"Land, bird. Settle down onto the glass. Lie still."

It did not. He felt stupid. He knew nothing at all about the bird. Nobody did. Yet somewhere, someone knew. Unless the slow birds did indeed come from God, as miracles, to punish. To make men God-fearing. But why should a God want to be feared? Unless God was insane, in which case the birds might well come from Him.

They were something irrational, something from elsewhere, something which couldn't be understood by their victims any more than an ant colony understood the gardener's boot, exposing the white eggs to the sun and the sparrows.

Maybe something had entered the seas from elsewhere the previous century, something that didn't like land dwellers. Any of them. People or sheep, birds or worms or plants ... It didn't seem likely. Salt water would rust steel, but for the first time in his life Jason thought about it intently.

"Bird, what are you? Why are you here?"

Why, he thought, is anything here? Why is there a world and sky and stars? Why shouldn't there simply be nothing for ever and ever?

Perhaps that was the nature of death: nothing for ever and ever. And one's life was like a slow bird. Appearing then vanishing, with nothing before and nothing after.

An immeasurable period of time later, dawn began to streak the sky behind him, washing it from black to grey. The greyness advanced slowly overhead as thick clouds filtered the light of the rising but hidden sun. Soon there was enough illumination to see clear all around. It must be five o'clock. Or six. But the grey glass remained blankly empty.

Who am I? wondered Jason, calm and still. Why am I conscious of a world? Why do people have minds,

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and think thoughts? For the first time in his life he felt that he was really thinking — and thinking had no outcome. It led nowhere.

He was, he realized, preparing himself to die. Just as all the land would die, piece by piece, fused into glass. Then no one would think thoughts any more, so that it wouldn't matter if a certain Jason Babbidge had ceased thinking at half past six one morning late in May. After all, the same thing happened every night when you went to sleep, didn't it? You stopped thinking. Perhaps everything would be purer and cleaner afterwards. Less untidy, less fretful: a pure ball of glass. In fact, not fretful at all, even if all the stars in the sky crashed into each other, even if the earth was swallowed by the sun. Silence, forever: once there was no one about to hear.

Maybe this was the message of the slow birds. Yet people only carved their initials upon them. And hearts. And the names of places which had been vitrified in a flash; or else which were going to be.

I'm becoming a philosopher, thought Jason in wonder.

He must have shifted into some hyperconscious state of mind: full of lucid clarity, though without immediate awareness of his surroundings. For he was not fully aware that help had arrived until the cord binding his ankles was cut and his right foot thrust up abruptly, toppling him off the other side of the bird into waiting arms.

Sam Partridge, Ned Darrow, Frank Yardley, and Uncle John, and Brian Sefton from the sawmill — who ducked under the bird brandishing a knife, and cut the other cord to free his wrists.

They retreated quickly from the bird, pulling Jason with them. He resisted feebly. He stretched an arm towards the bird.

"It's all right, lad," Uncle John soothed him.

"No, I want *to go*," he protested.

"Eh?"

At that moment the slow bird, having hung around long enough, vanished; and Jason stared at where it had been, speechless.

In the end his friends and uncle had to lead him away from that featureless spot on the glass, as though he was an idiot. Someone touched by imbecility.

But Jason did not long remain speechless.

Presently he began to teach. Or preach. One or the other. And people listened; at first in Atherton, then in other places too.

He had learned wisdom from the slow bird, people said of him. He had communed with the bird during that night's vigil on the glass.

His doctrine of nothingness and silence spread, taking root in fertile soil, where there was soil remaining rather than glass — which was in most places, still. A paradox, perhaps: how eloquently he spoke — about being silent!

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But in so doing he seemed to make the silence of the glass lakes sing; and to this people listened with a new ear.

Jason traveled throughout the whole island. And this was another paradox, for what he taught was a kind of passivity, a blissful waiting for a death that was more than merely personal, a death which was also the death of the sun and stars and of all existence, a cosmic death which transfigured individual mortality. And sometimes he even sat on the back of a bird that happened by, to speak to a crowd — as though chancing fate or daring, begging, the bird to take him away. But he never sat for more than an hour, then he would scramble down, trembling but quietly radiant. So besides being known as 'The Silent Prophet,' he was also known as 'The Man who rides the Slow Birds.'

On balance, it could have been said that he worked great psychological good for the communities that survived; and his words even spread overseas. His mother died proud of him — so he thought — though there was always an element of wistful reserve in her attitude....

Many years later, when Jason Babbidge was approaching sixty, and still no bird had ever borne him away, he settled back in Atherton in his old home — to which pilgrims of silence would come, bringing prosperity to the village and particularly to the Wheatsheaf, managed now by the daughter of the previous landlord.

And every Mayday the skate-sailing festival was still held, but now always on the glass at Atherton. No longer was it a race and a competition; since in the end the race of life could not be won. Instead it had become a pageant, a glass ballet, a re-enactment of the events of many years ago — a passion play performed by the four remaining villages. Tuckerton and all its folk had been glassed ten years before by a bird which destroyed itself so that the circle of annihilation exactly touched that edge of the glass where Tuckerton had stood till then.

One morning, the day before the festival, a knock sounded on Jason's door. His housekeeper, Martha Prestidge, was out shopping in the village; so Jason answered.

A boy stood there. With red hair, and freckles.

For a moment Jason did not recognize the boy. But then he saw that it was Daniel. Daniel, unchanged. Or maybe grown up a little. Maybe a year older.

"Dan...?"

The boy surveyed Jason bemusedly: his balding crown, his sagging girth, his now spindly legs, and the heavy stick with a stylised bird's head on which he leaned, gripping it with a liver-spotted hand.

"Jay," he said after a moment, "I've come back."

"Back? But...."

"I know what the birds are now!

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They *are* weapons. Missiles. Tens and hundreds of thousands of them. There's a war going on. But it's like a game as well: a board game run by machines. Machines that think. It's only been going on for a few days in their time. The missiles shunt to and fro through time to get to their destination. But they can't shunt in the time of that world, because of cause and effect. So here's where they do their shunting. In our world. The other possibility-world."

"This is nonsense. I won't listen."

"But you must, Jay! It can be stopped for us before it's too late. I know how. Both sides can interfere with each other's missiles and explode them out of sight — that's here — if they can find them fast enough. But the war over there's completely out of control. There's a winning pattern to it, but this only matters to the machines any longer, and they're buried away underground. They build the birds at a huge rate with material from the Earth's crust, and launch them into other-time automatically."

"Stop it, Dan."

"I fell off the bird over there — but I fell into a lake, so I wasn't killed, only hurt. There are still some pockets of land left, around the Bases. They patched me up, the people there. They're finished, in another few hours of their time — though it's dozens of years to us. I brought them great hope, because it meant that all life isn't finished. Just theirs. Life can go on. What we have to do is build a machine that will stop their machines finding the slow birds over here. By making interference in the air. There are waves. Like waves of light, but you can't see them."

"You're raving."

"Then the birds will still shunt here. But harmlessly. Without glassing us. And in a hundred years time, or a few hundred, they'll even stop coming at all, because the winning pattern will be all worked out by then. One of the war machines will give up, because it lost the game. Oh I know it ought to be able to give up right now! But there's an element of the irrational programmed into the machines' brains too; so they don't give up too soon. When they do, everyone will be long dead there on land — and some surviving people think the war machines will start glassing the ocean floor as a final strategy before they're through. But we can build an air-wave-maker. They've locked the knowledge in my brain. It'll take us a few years to mine the right metals and tool up and provide a power source...." Young Daniel ran out of breath briefly. He gasped. "They had a prototype slow bird. They sat me on it and sent me into other-time again. They managed to guide it. It emerged just ten miles from here. So I walked home."

"Prototype? Air-waves? Power source? What are these?"

"I can tell you."

"Those are just words. Fanciful

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babble. Oh for this babble of the world to still itself!"

"Just give me time, and I'll—"

"Time? You desire time? The mad ticking of men's minds instead of the great pure void of eternal silence? You reject acceptance? You want us to swarm forever aimlessly, deafening ourselves with our noisy chatter?"

"Look ... I suppose you've had a long, tough life, Jay. Maybe I shouldn't have come here first."

"Oh, but you should indeed, my impetuous fool of a brother. And I do not believe my life has been ill-spent."

Daniel tapped his forehead. "It's all in here. But I'd better get it down on paper. Make copies and spread it around — just in case Atherton gets glassed. Then somebody else will know how to build the transmitter. And life can go on. Over there they think maybe the human race is the only life in the whole universe. So we have a duty to go on existing. Only, the others have destroyed themselves arguing about which way to exist. But we've still got time enough. We can build ships to sail through space to the stars. I know a bit about that too. I tell you, my visit brought them real joy in their last hours, to know this was all still possible after all."

"Oh, Dan." And Jason groaned. Patriach-like, he raised his staff and brought it crashing down on Daniel's skull.

He had imagined that he mightn't really notice the blood amidst Daniel's bright red hair. But he did.

The boy's body slumped in the doorway. With an effort Jason dragged it inside, then with an even greater effort up the oak stairs to the attic where Martha Prestidge hardly ever went. The corpse might begin to smell after a while, but it could be wrapped up in old blankets and such.

However, the return of his housekeeper down below distracted Jason. Leaving the body on the floor he hastened out, turning the key in the lock and pocketing it.

It had become the custom to invite selected guests back to the Babbidge house following the Mayday festivities; so Martha Prestidge would be busy all the rest of the day cleaning and cooking and setting the house to rights. As was the way of housekeepers she hinted that Jason would get under her feet; so off he walked down to the glass and out onto its perfect flatness to stand and meditate. Villagers and visitors spying the lone figure out there nodded gladly. Their prophet was at peace, presiding over their lives. And over their deaths.

The skate-sailing masque, the passion play, was enacted as brightly and gracefully as ever the next day.

It was May the Third before Jason could bring himself to go up to the attic again, carrying sacking and cord. He unlocked the door.

But apart from a dark stain of dried

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blood the floorboards were bare. There was only the usual jumble stacked around the walls. The room was empty of any corpse. And the window was open.

So he hadn't killed Daniel after all. The boy had recovered from the blow. Wild emotions stirred in Jason, disturbing his usual composure. He stared out of the window as though he might discover the boy lying below on the cobbles. But of Daniel there was no sign. He searched around Atherton, like a haunted man, asking no questions but looking everywhere piercingly. Finding no clue, he ordered a horse and cart to take him to Edgewood. From there he traveled all around the glass, through Buckby and Hopperton; and now he asked wherever he went, "Have you seen a boy with red hair?" The villagers told each other that Jason Babbidge had had another vision.

As well he might have, for within the year from far away news began to spread of a new teacher, with a new message. This new teacher was only a youth, but he had also ridden a slow bird — much farther than the Silent Prophet had ever ridden one.

However, it seemed that this young teacher was somewhat flawed, since he couldn't remember all the details of his message, of what he had been told to say. Sometimes he would beat his head with his fists in frustration, till it seemed that blood would flow. Yet perversely this touch of theatre appealed to some restless, troublesome streak in his audiences. They believed him because they saw his anguish, and it mirrored their own suppressed anxieties.

Jason Babbidge spoke zealously to oppose the rebellious new ideas, exhausting himself. All the philosophical beauty he had brought into the dying world seemed to hang in the balance; and reluctantly he called for a 'crusade' against the new teacher, to defend his own dream of Submission.

Two years later, he might well have wished to call his words back, for their consequence was that people were tramping across the countryside in between the zones of annihilation armed with pitchforks and billhooks, cleavers and sickles. Villages were burnt; many hundreds were massacred; and there were rapes — all of which seemed to recall an earlier nightmare of Jason's from before the time of his revelation.

In the third year of this seemingly endless skirmish between the Pacificists and the Survivalists Jason died, feeling bitter beneath his cloak of serenity; and by way of burial his body was roped to a slow bird. Loyal mourners accompanied the bird in silent procession until it vanished hours later. A short while after that, quite suddenly at the Battle of Ashton Glass, it was all over, with victory for the Survivalists led by their young red-haired champion, who it was noted bore a striking resemblance to old Jason Babbidge, so that it almost seemed as though two

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basic principles of existence had been at contest in the world: two aspects of the selfsame being, two faces of one man.

Fifty years after that, by which time a full third of the land was glass and the climate was worsening, the Survival College in Ashton at last invented the promised machine; and from then on slow birds continued to appear and fly and disappear as before, but now none of them exploded.

And a hundred years after that all the slow birds vanished from the Earth. Somewhere, a war was over, logically and finally.

But by then, from an Earth four-fifths of whose land surface was desert or swamp — in between necklaces of barren shining glass — the first starship would arise into orbit.

It would be called *Slow Bird.* For it would fly to the stars, slowly. Slowly in human terms; two generations it would take. But that was comparatively fast.

A second starship would follow it; called *Daniel.*

Though after that massive and exhausting effort, there would be no more starships. The remaining human race would settle down to cultivate what remained of their garden in amongst the dunes and floods and acres of glass. Whether either starship would find a new home as habitable even as the partly glassed Earth, would be merely an article of faith.

* * *

On his deathbed, eighty years of age, in Ashton College lay Daniel who had never admitted to a family name.

The room was almost indecently overcrowded, though well if warmly ventilated by a wind whipping over Ashton Glass, and bright-lit by the silvery blaze reflecting from that vitrified expanse.

The dying old man on the bed beneath a single silken sheet was like a bird himself now: shrivelled with thin bones, a beak of a nose, beady eyes and a rooster's comb of red hair on his head.

He raised a frail hand as if to summon those closest, even closer. Actually it was to touch the old wound in his skull which had begun to ache fiercely of late as though it was about to burst open or cave in, unlocking the door of memory — notwithstanding that no one now needed the key hidden there, since his Collegians had discovered it independently, given the knowledge that it existed.

Faces leaned over him: confident, dedicated faces.

"They've stopped exploding, then?" he asked, forgetfully.

"Yes, yes, years ago!" they assured him.

"And the stars—?"

"We'll build the ships. We'll discover how."

His hand sank back on to the sheet. "Call one of them—"

"Yes?"

"*Daniel.* Will you?"

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They promised him this.
"That way ... my spirit...."
"Yes?"
"...will fly...."
"Yes?"
"...into the silence of space."

This slightly puzzled the witnesses of his death; for they could not know that Daniel's last thought was that, when the day of the launching came, he and his brother might at last be reconciled.

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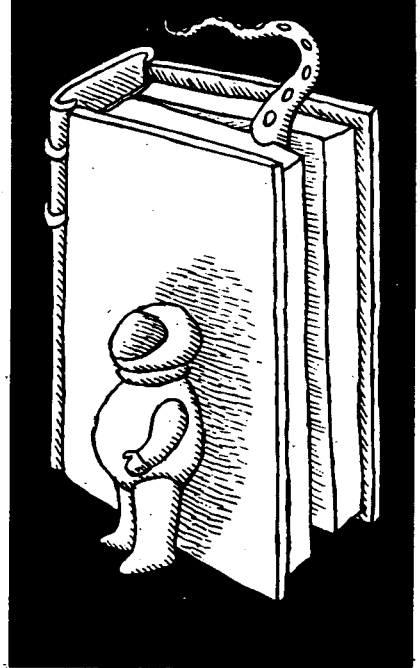

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

Floating Dragon, Peter Straub, Putnam's. $15.95

Pulling Through, Dean Ing, Ace, $2.95

Stalking the Nightmare, Harlan Ellison, Phantasia Press, 13101 Lincoln St., Huntington Woods, MI 48070, $16.00

Among highly visible trends in poplit these days is the re-emergence of horror writing as a powerful genre.* What this means sociologically, I don't know. I don't think it means the end of civilization, even as we know the thing we call civilization. But there are some knotty questions.

Horror writing has never been completely distinct from SF — that is, from speculative fiction, the literature, as distinguished from science fiction or newsstand fantasy, the genres — starting even before Frankenstein's midnight resurrections and finding considerable nourishment in the talents of Poe and such nominally pure fantasists as M.R. James. If there is a bent for speculation, for trying to make sense of worlds of supposition, the precursor for such a predilection must be some profound feeling that this seeming irrationality conceals a fearsome control

**You may not remember, but just before World War II there were several horror pulps. In addition, such journals as* Argosy *and* Weird Tales *paid considerable attention to the form, in among their more normal freight of science fiction and classically derived fantasy. Such Golden Age SF writers as Henry Kuttner also wrote regularly for the horror pulps.*

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by behind-the-scenes manipulators who have no concern for human piety or wit.

Science fiction in particular is the branch of SF that explicitly denies this proposition. The stated tenet of science fiction is that everything is explicable. Furthermore, most science fiction is romantic; it declares that the universe is susceptible to intelligent intervention. The credo of science fiction, then, can be read as an adult controversion of adolescent and pre-adolescent night terrors.

So can the parallel credo of newsstand fantasy. As developed in the *Unknown* magazines by John W. Campbell, Jr. and then in F&SF by Anthony Boucher and J. Francis McComas,* this distinct sub-form owes little to Medievalism and in fact is hardly Gothic at all. Campbell, the great rationalizer of supposition, used *Astouding's* authors to produce a school of fantasy that was more interested in the thermodynamics and contract law of a deal with the Devil than it was with just what a "soul" might actually be, and not at all interested in any anguishes beyond the physical. The problem with going to Hell was that you would be in pain, not that you would be damned. On that point, Campbell found the place where the romantic and the Gothic divide; there was more Thomas Edison than Nathaniel Hawthorne in his magic.

But I've wondered about that, from time to time. Not much science fiction — less than we say, even when we're being at our most objective — truly hews to the strait and narrow. There are plenty of stories in which the universe is conquerable. Successfully manipulable is harder to find. The stated tenent may be stated in all credulous sincerity, but I'm not sure it's what sells the most to the nominal science fiction audience. Nor is the pure, *Unknown*-style fantasy the kind that sells best; it certainly isn't Tolkien's kind, and even in Campbell's heyday, now nearly 45 years past, it wasn't always *Unknown*'s kind, either.

I think, therefore, that inside most adult SF readers there may still be some major element of the wondering child, and that at times the child trembles. Oh, pleasurably, perhaps.

Why not? We're not really so different from those who distinguish themselves by not liking speculation, sometimes so vehemently that one wonders where all the smoke comes from. And in their nominally straight world, the fact is that the inhabitants are chronically terrified. Just listen to what they claim to believe, and what they deny. Talk about living in a world of fantasy!

And as further nurtured by all subsequent F&SF editors, as well as by Lester del Rey in his various running attempts to make fantasy viable on the stands of the 1950s and '60s. It seems hard to believe now, but until the Tolkien generation matured, you could barely give the stuff away to the mass public. Several shattered careers and a parcel of broken hearts testify to that fact.

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So it's no surprise when movie-going crowds flock to scenes of a guttural little girl rotating her head in a full circle while spewing peas. I'm sure it's no surprise to theologists to see voodoo, once again, being marketed as piety; most forms of mass religion have been forms of encrypted demonolatry. Dreadful things lurk everywhere in the "real" world, just beyond the thin and feeble reaches of what passes there for rationality.

So it's also no surprise that Peter Straub's *Floating Dragon* is a selection of the Literary Guild and the Doubleday Book Club. Nor, although there is not a shred of any form of crime plot in it, am I astonished that it's further a selection of the Mystery Guild. There are enough trappings of crime-story furniture in it to furnish the necessary pretext. Ditto, of course, for its additional selection by the SF Book Club.

But that latter straw is the one we are straining at here. That is, in what *way* is a horror story compatible with SF? Not on any rational or philosophical grounds; right? But over the years, often, horror has been marketed to SF people. Who, for instance, would deny that H.P. Lovecraft is part and parcel of SF, and, even more tellingly, of newsstand SF? What of the career of Robert Bloch? There is some *geist*, some spiritual strain of affinity between those who claim the intellectual freedom of speculative thinking and a subliterature that declares humankind is in chains, and I think we'd be smart to devote some little time to noodling out what that affinity might be.

Meanwhile, *Floating Dragon* is about a "thinking cloud" of bacteriological weapon that drifts over coastal Connecticut, killing birds that patter down on the town of Hampstead as the gentle reign from Heaven, eventually settling out in forms that cause human skin to liquefy gradually. Science fiction, right, even though Straub never explains in what sense his cloud is "thinking," it being entirely at the mercy of meteorology, and lacking intent.

The stuff, yclept cloud, began as a spill in a hidden research center operated at the behest of a frothy-mouthed militarist whose goon squads, ideologies and tentacular involvements in the politico-industrial complex come straight out of Richard Condon.

Now, as it happens, the town of Hampstead is haunted by primeval evil, Knievel, that has at times caused it to be abandoned as a stagecoach rest stop — the dead were said to be seen walking and rotting in the streets — and which incidentally results in mass murder once in every generation. (These episodes are apparently followed by mass amnesia, for no one seems readily aware of this peculiar history.) So you can imagine how complex things become when the cloud adds to the crisis building up as this generation's peak of evil nears.

There is, in fact, a fit of peak, brought on by the operations of a

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devil/demon/dragon who, disguised as a gynecologist, goes around disemboweling the sort of lady who signs up for the Literary Guild, but also creates mass hallucinations(?) of fire, brimstone, and giant dogs, to say nothing of thick yellow fluid in the plumbing.

Fortunately, there are four residents of Hampstead who appear to have been last located in Theodore Sturgeon's *More Than Human*. Two of them have a telepathic bond, and the other two are variously precognitive, perhaps telekinetic, and can spot the aura of evil a mile away. Singing "When the red, red robin goes bob, bob, bobbin' along, along..."* they tackle the devil and win.

This will give you some sense of the flavor of this work. There is also some business with the local cops that is straight out of *The Choirboys*, with appropriate ornamentation, and there is the deliquescing man's voyeuristic experience in the little theatre off Times Square, and there is a — I swear — golden-haired moppet, a boy named Tabby, who has a wicked father and a loving stepmother and, I am certain, an uncle named Stephen. There is a mobster businessman out of John D. MacDonald by Ed McBain, and the rest is mostly furniture left at the curb when *Weird Tales* moved out of town.

Peter Straub is, as it happens, an extremely competent writer. Hardly the "major American writer" touted in Putnam's flack copy, and doomed never to be, now that he has tarred himself so successfully with genre pelf, he is nevertheless far better than average at deploying prose to the purpose of fiction. He is, for instance, a more skillful wordsmith than Stephen King, whose major strengths lie elsewhere but who is also no slouch, and although I haven't studied the horror field exhaustively I would be astonished if it could offer a rival to Straub as prosaist. He has both a gift for language and the intelligence required to give it depth.

And that may be his problem. I cannot imagine someone as manifestly intelligent as Straub putting together this farrago of ideas and half-notions and not laughing himself silly at the poor dolts who will flock to consume it. What I'm saying is I think he's cynical ... above average cynical ... and that his work is exploitative. Now, we know what he's exploiting in the case of the mass audience, but what, in whom, is being exploited among SF Book Club readers?†

* * *

**No, I'm not making this up. It is true, however, that they also have the power to sing a chorus that doesn't scan, because Straub omits a repeated phrase, making the second of two errors in this crucial piece of business.*

†Incidentally, it's when the red, red robin comes bob, bob, bobbin' along. Considering how much weight he makes the lyric carry, Straub could have looked it up. If not he, then Putnam editorial. But this error is shared, curiously, by hot new writer W.T. Tyler, in his The Ants of God. *Anyone seen Straub and Tyler at the same time, lately?*

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How about atomic doom? Dean Ing's *Pulling Through* is a curious hybrid. The text includes not only a fiction novella but a deadly serious piece of nonfiction on how to build your own fallout radiation meter out of everyday materials at home. Both parts are quite good (judging the fiction for reability, and the construction text for weight of paper). The story is about the fellow who leads a small band of forethoughtful people through the perils of fallout and other consequences of atomic attack on the San Francisco area. Despite being actually a fictionalized further essay on How to Survive Fallout and Looting in Your Own Home, with many simple tips on tricks with plastic sheeting, duct tape and books, the story zings right along as one might expect from honest workman Ing.

I would imagine also that the meter would work if built, although I doubt if the diagrams in Ace's edition are sufficiently legible to make it as easy as it ought to be if it's going to be what it's proferred by Ace to be if you follow me.

So much for the thing Ace has packaged. At the price, it will do you no harm, it will educate you in some things you probably ought to know, and, whatever, it will certainly entertain you. Particularly if, like most SF people, you react with fascination to stories about atomic doom and/or stories about the little band of survivors during the collapse of civilization.

Why do we react that way, I wonder? It has been done again and again; it was the topic of the novel Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley wrote after the vast success of her first novel, *Frankenstein.* H.G. Wells treated of it extensively, Rudyard Kipling verged on it in "As Easy as A.B.C.," Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague,* George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* and Stephen Vincent Benet's "By the Waters of Babylon" are three more examples that spring at once to mind.

In our "genre," there are scores of others, much closer to being within the core of newsstand SF, beginning with George Allan England's *The Twenty-Fifth Hour* (as a *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* pulp magazine reprint) and thence proceeding solidly through so many examples that simply mentioning *The Long, Loud Silence* and *No Blade of Grass* will have to do.

The thing about these stories is that they obviously share a common aspect of fascination despite the fact that the mechanisms of doom may vary from one to another. Ever since the atom bomb, nuclear warfare has been the pet but not the invariable pretext. But it's clear that plague — still the overall favorite — or almost any other excuse will do. What we want is the story of the little group — the tribal unit, with its packing of archetypes — making its own rules as society collapses but the toys — the cars, the guns, the luxury houses, the yachts and the aircraft, and sex without the neighbors judging —

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are still available for the taking.

We love 'em. Don't argue; we *love* 'em. And yet, if you think about it, the fact that we love 'em says we hate and fear civilization and all its restraints. Perhaps not all the time. But often enough. And of course the thing about hating civilization *at all* is that it drives you wild because you can't get away from civilization, ever, for more than the brief burst of blinding intoxication that comes from lofting a paving stone at an oncoming tank. Except in your own mind. In your own mind, there are all the tricks you can play.

There are times, my friend, when we — even we — court the darkness. We claim, of course, that we can rationalize it. That we can, in the privacy of our own homes, invent ways of handling it — measuring it, containing it, rendering it harmless. Yes, indeed.

You know what the straights are going to do? They're going to crack this planet because they can't afford the clothes and the car that would allow them to date Loni Anderson or Tom Selleck. Of course, each of us knows in our heart of hearts that we'll emerge from the rubble and make sense of it after they've screwed it all up, right?

Now, Harlan Ellison says that if there is a person with a decent impulse, if there is a moment of love, the impulse and the moment are invariably sufficient to evoke crass, crushing destruction by the way things *really* are. Except every scarce now and then, of course.

We love hearing it. In *Stalking the Nightmare*, we can hear it again.

Why do we want to? It's not true. Experience and observation show there is no correlation between arousing the envy of the gods and getting zapped. But we want to believe it's true. And so we have made, of a skilled writer with a personality that invites trouble, a spokesman for all of us who feel that goodness invites trouble.

On the face of it, *Stalking the Nightmare* is the latest collection from an extremely able short-story writer, whether considered in the SF universe or, more properly, measured against any such figure in English-language writing. Gathered from sometimes obscure sources, dating often from the mid-1950s but provided with a good leavening of middle-period and recent Ellison, it slices through the author's career like a core sample. If you wanted just one Ellison book, for some reason, this would be the one.

It comes, incidentally, with a worshipful introduction by Stephen King, who apparently believes all those stories about Ellison having been a nitro truck driver, a South Seas pearl diver, and a Mafia hit man. I think Ellison is more wisely taken for the high value of what's on paper and can actually be palpated, but otherwise King is both useful and informative on his topic, so that's a bonus.

A bigger bonus is the masterly production job done by Phantasia Press, which is coming to be the very worthy

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successor to the famous small presses that originally made book SF not only respectable but collectible. If you order your copy by mail, also ask for their catalogue. (I don't know for sure, but I think adding about $1.50 ought to cover shipping and handling on the book; otherwise, I'm sure any of the SF-carrying bookstores and mail-order dealers can get it for you if they don't stock it.)

The thing that strikes me, in our present context, is the role Ellison and what may be called Harlanotry play in our community. Each new thing he writes, no matter how ostensibly different from what has gone before, is all of a piece with a view of the universe as hostile and capricious. And the details of his actual life, as well as the apocrypha he feels obliged to add to its embellishment, appear as a role played in the grand composition of his life. He is his own hero, and in that sense is very much at one with the protagonists he has deployed in his written creations. And we love it.

We have always loved it. We cherish him now with an intensity that marks social esteem not for an individual but for what that individual triggers in us. But we would never have taken him into our hearts in the first place if there were not a place waiting there for such as he. Nor would he have advanced into that place if he hadn't, in his earliest beginnings, already been attuned to its existence within him. He is, in what he does, what he says, and in what he says he does, part of us. And I suspect ... I strongly suspect ... that while Ellison is the genuine article, there have been times in our history when, lacking an Ellison, we have done our best to invent one. So deep is the need. It had never previously occurred to me to detect a link between Ellison and Lovecraft, and Lovecraft's precursors and descendants, but if there is something to this construct, it explains the affinity between Ellison and Robert Bloch ... and Stephen King.

What it explains about us, I can only dream about.

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R. Bretnor's new story concerns a young man in search of wonders, who tracks down a tale about a frog and a remarkable surgical operation.

The Frog He Would A-Wooing Go

BY
REGINALD BRETNOR

It was not long before we were married, when I was just starting to write — I hoped professionally — that Catherine suggested I visit her Aunt Edith.

"If you're really determined, Rollie," said she, "to do a book on everything that's unexplained and unbelievable and wonderful — and I don't see why you shouldn't, for after all Charles Fort did and lots of other people — then you should hear her story. It's one she never told for years and years, till finally I wormed it out of her, but I know she'll tell you if I ask her to. You can stop by next time you drive down to London. Bright Bramble can't be more than four or five miles from the main road, and anyone there can tell you where Miss Robertson's cottage is. When you have your next trip all planned, let me know and I'll phone her for you."

"Bright Bramble? That's the name of the village?"

"Yes. A lovely little place. Goodness only knows what it was called originally, probably in Anglo-Saxon or Norman French, but it's on the river Brabble — not *Bramble*, but with two Bs. Aunt Edith bought there years before she retired, when she was still managing that Cottage Hospital at Surbaston — I've told you that she's been a nurse all her life, a splendid one, and I daresay she still takes care of the local people when they're ill. After all, she's only in her seventies, and you know what my family is like."

"What's her story all about?" I asked.

She smiled at me. "I'm not going to tell you — you'll have to hear it from her. But don't worry — I promise you it'll be worth your time and trouble, even though you probably won't believe a word of it, and won't dare to

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print it even if you do."

I raised an eyebrow. The war was four years over, the war during which I had been wounded, more painfully than critically; but I was still recovering rather publicly with a walking stick, so naturally I wondered whether she was coddling me, going out of her way to divert me from what everyone believed to be my troubles.

She read my mind as though we had been married for a decade. "I've not been playing games with you, Roland," she told me seriously. "You'll realize that after you've listened to Aunt Edith."

Anyhow, that's how it came about that a fortnight later, on a wonderful April day of sudden sunlight and soft showers, I turned off onto the narrow, winding road that proclaimed Bright Bramble its destination. I drove slowly, enjoying the gentle falls of rain, dispelled magically by the sun's cheerful, shining face only to return again, and I thought of how much more magical the world must have seemed to Chaucer's pilgrims on their so-much-slower journey to sacred Canterbury, in a world still illuminated by the glow of miracles.

The road really was a lane, bordered with rowans and hollies, sometimes closed in by honeysuckle hedges. After perhaps a mile, when the trees thinned away, it joined the Brabble, a river scarcely bigger than a brook, its banks dotted with willows, thick with reeds and sedges, and with still, shallow backwaters where I could see fish rising at the April insects.

It was a lovely drive, and I was almost sorry when, having left the Brabble's company, the road passed through another stand of trees on the brow of a long green hill, and without warning I saw the rain-wet roofs of Bright Bramble shining in the reawakened sunlight in a valley through which the river, too lazy to climb a hill, was flowing. For a moment, then, I almost thought I had been translated back to Chaucer's day. It was an ancient village. Not one of its shops and cottages, not the small stone church with its square steeple, could possibly have been built after Tudor times. A few cars cowered in its streets, like unexpected and unwelcome guests.

I asked my way of a young constable riding a push-bike, and he very kindly led me down another lane or two to a low rise close to the river's edge.

"That'll be it, sir," he said, pointing to a large frame-and-plaster cottage newly thatched. "That'll be Miss Robertson's. Is she a friend of yours?"

I told him she was my intended's favorite aunt, and that I was looking forward to meeting her for the first time.

His rugged face broke into a smile so swift and generous that I automatically smiled with him. "You'll love her!" he declared. "There's nobody just like her, sir."

I waved good-bye to him, stopped

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my car outside her garage gate, and saw that she was standing in her doorway awaiting me.

For some reason, Catherine had never described her to me nor shown me her photograph, and oddly it had never occurred to me to wonder. But whatever I might have expected, it was not what I saw.

Aunt Edith was tall, close to my own six feet, and as straight as any sergeant-major in the Guards. And she was big — big-boned, wide-shouldered. Her relaxed hands were large and capable and beautifully shaped. Under her Edwardian mountain of gray hair, her almost unlined face was gentle — with that unconquerable gentleness born only of great strength. I could see that, as a nurse, most of her patients must have obeyed her without quibbling — and loved her, too; and it was my guess that probably the only people to question her authority had been doctors jealous of their own, and that even they must have respected her and, yes, feared her a little. She never, even in her girlhood, could have been pretty, and no one, I was sure, ever could have thought her beautiful. But in no way was she unfeminine; and, as she came down the path to greet me, it struck me that once she must have been the sort of girl to whom, in feudal times, a wise baron might have betrothed his eldest son.

She advanced toward me, and I could see that her nurse's eye was appraising my slight limp. We shook hands, and there was no question that we liked each other. Asking me for news of Catherine, she led me through her garden, a surprisingly big garden for so small a cottage, and almost Japanese — not in neatness, because it was anything but neat — but in the number of its mossy, rock-edged ponds and pools.

Her parlor floor was uneven, for the cottage had settled solidly into the unevenness of centuries, but somehow her antique chairs and tables were firm and comfortable on their dark red Persian carpet. The room was full of knickknacks — Spode and Wedgwood and Royal Doulton, I suppose — and there were photos everywhere: of Aunt Edith in her first nurse's uniform, of friends and colleagues, and of patients not only from civil life, but from both wars. A few were signed, and some of the names were great and famous ones.

She seated me at one side of her fireplace, beside a welcoming but really not quite necessary fire.

"Roland—" she said. "I may call you Roland, mayn't I? You don't mind? After all, I'll soon be your aunt, too."

I laughed. "You can even call me Rollie, Auntie Edith. And that's not something I let everybody do."

She laughed with me. "Later on, we'll have some tea," she told me, "but I imagine that right now you'd rather have a drink. I know I would. I've whiskey-and-soda, or would you like something else?"

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I told her that whiskey would be fine, and in no time she had the two drinks made, and they were good and strong. She took the chair opposite mine. We drank.

"Kitty — your Catherine — has told me quite a bit about your book," she said, "so I've a general notion of what it's going to be about. But I'm curious about how you're going to handle it. Are you simply going to list your incidents, as some of the writers on such subjects do? Or are you going to look for explanations? And how much evidence will you require before you decide to print somebody's account?"

I told her everything I could about my plans, about the material I had already, and how I proposed going about finding more, and about an article I'd sold to *Blackwood's*. As I talked, developing my ideas, answering her questions, it became evident that she had already read a great deal of the existing literature, and not only read it, but given it much thought. I realized that she was just as interested as I myself.

"You see, Roland," she said finally, "what's really so important about all these unexplained happenings — disappearances and Devil's Footprints, and poltergists and rains of blood, and the Abominable Snowman and whatever — is what they can tell us about this world of which we are a part. It used to be that we lived in a magic world, a world of miracles, where a baker's boy could slay a dragon for its treasure, a peasant girl's three wishes could make her the consort of an emperor, and geese laid golden eggs, and a minstrel, abducted by the fairies, could sleep for fifty years or a century. In that world of magic, of unseen powers, nobody *needed* explanations for such wonders, any more than we today need to explain the winning of a football pool or the Irish Sweep. They were accepted as a benison, as an antidote to the agonies and terrors and tragedies and disappointments of ordinary existence. People did not *believe* in them — they simply *knew* that they were rare but real.

"But today the reverse is true. Some people *do* believe in the miraculous, but even they no longer *know*. They've lost the sense of *certainty*. At least, they all have but a very few. That is the nature of our world. I could easily have believed that a great queen like Elizabeth, or even wicked Henry or dull old George III, could heal the King's Evil with a touch — but could anyone believe it of any monarch anywhere today? And because that *is* the kind of world we live in, even those who have been touched by magic either dare not to tell of it, or else, being mad enough to tell, are contemptuously dismissed as lunatics."

She paused, and looked at me. "And that," she said, "brings me to my own story, which Kitty promised you I'd tell, and which I'm sure you won't believe."

* * *

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She put her glass down, leaned forward slightly in her chair.

"My training as a nurse," she told me, "was at St. Anselm's, back before the first war, when Edward VII was still on the throne. It was a Poor Law hospital, and that meant that we had cases you'd never even see nowadays — tertiary syphilis, and unhealed ulcers fingers deep, and hundreds of the tragically tubercular. It also meant that they made fine nurses out of us, for it was twelve hours a day, six days a week, with no lifts and none of today's ingenious substitutes for care. After I graduated, I stayed on, partly because of the challenge, and partly because we had the chance to learn so much, for there were really great physicians and surgeons working there — like Sir Victor Horsley sometimes, for example, and Mr. James Macondray, whom I particularly admired in spite of his astounding abrasive personality, for he was a genius in the surgery. The procedures he'd devised had been radically imaginative, and radically successful, and he had published any number of papers in *The Lancet*. Besides, St. Anselm's was quite pleasantly situated, in Kensington, in the midst of a carefully tended garden, and I made many friends there.

"At any rate, *it* happened almost two years after my graduation, on another lovely April day very much like this one. A fortnight previously, we had admitted an emergency patient — and we somehow managed to pick up quite a few of them — who not only was not impoverished or of the lower classes, but actually was titled and, so at least the gossip went, as rich as Croesus. She had fainted in the street, and had been brought to us. Her personal physician, Lord Woolsey Havell, had of course been summoned, and he had immediately diagnosed an obscure but dangerous heart condition, and had laid down the law. Her Grace the duchess was under no circumstances to be moved. She was to have a private room. She was to have private nurses. And, as Lord Havell was on the point of starting off to address a learned congress of physicians at Leipzig, she was to remain with us at least two weeks and possibly more.

"Mr. Macondray was very much put out about it. She had been given what was certainly the best room in the whole hospital, on the first floor, overlooking the prettiest part of the garden, and two patients had been moved out so she could have it.

" 'Ah, Nurse Robertson,' he said, when he informed me that I was to be her day nurse, 'do you know, then, who the woman is? No? Well, she's the dowager duchess of Clayne, the widow of that miserable old duke who died at sea four or five years ago, and she's not even properly British. The old fool found her somewhere on the Continent and married her. Now she's sixty-five if she's a day, fat as a parish pig, and — God help me! — as strong as a dray horse. But Lord Havell's fobbed her off

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on us, and all we can do is mumble *Yes, me lord,* and *Of course, me lord.* It's a damned outrage!'

"Of course, I felt for him, but still I had to admit that he was a little unfair to the duchess, even though my own first view of her was far from favorable. She was very fat indeed, and wrinkled in spite of it; and she was propped up in bed wearing a frilly linen nightdress with enormous quantities of what I took to be brussels lace about it. Her hair was badly tinted, and her lips — very inexpertly — were rouged. But she took to me immediately, so that half the time I had to sit there holding her hand comfortingly while she told me the most outrageous stories about the duke in her strange little foreign accent, and the other half I had to read aloud to her — Ouida was her favorite. Besides that, she did seem quite indubitably mad. She absolutely refused to obey any orders that didn't please her, and she ate constantly, for a servant used to come by every day, smuggling forbidden dainties in to her — a practice we at first tried to stop, setting off the wildest hysterics. Naturally, her rumblings abdominal — like those of the duchess in the limerick — were simply phenomenal, and these she herself had diagnosed: they were, she averred, not rumblings at all, but the croakings of an unfortunate frog trapped in her stomach. 'I 'ave so often told about it to Lord Havell, but alvays he say no, it is that I eat too much! And I tell him alvays he must operate—'

"Even all that would not have been so bad had she not also practically fallen in love with Mr. Macondray. Two or three times every day, she summoned him desperately to her bedside, claiming one dire emergency or another, and then held on to him, telling him about her frog and pleading with him to perform the necessary surgery, until he turned brick red and muttered and, somehow, managed to break away.

"He was a great, sturdy bear of a man with a firm jaw and a huge moustache, and he always drove himself hard, as if testing his own endurance. But within a week, the duchess had him thoroughly worn down. His eyes were bloodshot, and now there were little pouches under them, and his hands sometimes actually shook a little. I really became quite concerned about him.

"Then, on the ninth or tenth day after we had admitted her, he stopped me in the hallway as I was coming back from supper.

" 'Nurse Robertson,' he said, 'tomorrow morning, you will prepare Her Grace for surgery at eleven. If possible, try to persuade her to eat no breakfast, but it will not be critical.'

" 'But— but Mr. Macondray,' I protested, 'what is the surgery *for?* And what will Lord Havell have to say about it when he returns?'

" 'I shall operate to remove the frog inside her stomach,' he replied. 'Perhaps we can call it psychological surgery, after the principles of that

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new man Freud, or whoever he is, in Vienna. I shall make a very light, very superficial incision, just long enough to plausibly accommodate a frog. I shall close it again. When she awakens, we shall display the frog to her. She will have been proved right. And she will, of course, be cured.'

" 'But Mr. Macondray,' I argued, 'she won't *have* a frog inside her!'

" 'Of course she won't,' he answered. 'Before the operation, you can find me one somewhere in the garden — at this time of year there'll be a lot of them.'

"Roland, you can imagine how I felt. On the one hand, I recognized that Mr. Macondray's plan very probably would work. On the other, I trembled at the thought that he would be risking his whole future — especially when Lord Havell got word of it. But there was literally nothing I could do. I certainly had no intention of embarrassing Mr. Macondray by protesting to the hospital authorities.

"That evening, I paid two small boys to find a frog for me, and they brought me a fine specimen, a big green fellow. I put him in a box with a few flies and kept him in my room overnight, and the next morning — I remember that it was a Thursday — as soon as the duchess had been taken off to surgery, I went back and got him, and had him ready when, scarcely half an hour later, they wheeled her in again and got her back into her bed, snoring quite happily. With Mr. Macondray was a surgical intern, Mr. Bell, a young man with large ears, who now produced a heavy object in a paper bag.

" 'What the devil's *that?*' Mr. Macondray asked, seating himself at the foot of the bed.

" 'It's a small pumpkin, sir,' Bell answered proudly. 'I thought, sir, that if by some chance Her Grace didn't believe the frog was *hers* — well, then, you could show this to her in the bag, and say that her trouble hadn't been a frog at all — it had been a tumor.'

" 'Don't be an ass, Bell!' Mr. Macondray barked. 'Throw the damned thing out. Out of the window! *Now!*'

Rather shamefacedly, Bell did as he was bidden; and for a few minutes the three of us sat there in silence, while the duchess began to show signs of imminent awakening.

" 'Is the frog ready, Nurse Robertson?' Mr. Macondray asked.

"I handed him the box, and he nodded approvingly. My patient now definitely was waking up, and so I went to her and stroked her head, and helped her lift it from the pillow, and gave her just a sip of water, hoping that she might not be nauseated. I took her pulse, and it was strong and steady. Her eyes opened. Almost in an instant, she was wide awake.

"Mr. Macondray came and stood beside me. 'I am happy to inform Your Grace,' he declared solemnly, 'that your surgery was a complete success. You were quite right about the cause

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of your discomfort—'

"And it was at this point, Roland, just as he was about to hand Her Grace the frog, that the door opened and Lord Woolsey Havell strode into the room, back two or three days early from the Continent.

"Mr. Macondray was holding the frog in his two hands. The duchess was sitting up in bed, reaching for it eagerly. Mr. Bell, suddenly was trying to appear invisible.

'*What is the meaning of this?*' demanded Lord Havell imperiously. 'Macondray, what have you been doing with my patient?'

" 'I have been *curing* her, Your Lordship!' Mr. Macondray snapped. 'She has just come back from surgery, where I have successfully removed the cause of her abdominal distress.'

" 'You have *what?* Sir, I gave you no permission to perform an operation on Her Grace!'

" 'I 'ave given him permission, *Doctor* Havell,' said the duchess. 'I 'ave told him all about the frog, vhich you 'ave said vas a delusion, and from my stomach he 'as taken it.'

"Lord Woolsey Havell bared his teeth, smiling like a wolf about to eat Little Red Riding-Hood. 'Macondray,' he declared, 'you never again shall practice surgery — certainly not in England. Believe me, *I* shall see to *that!*'

"I was simply standing there appalled, never guessing how wonderfully it would all turn out.

"The duchess was bolt upright in her bed, reaching out for the frog. 'Be quiet, *stupide!*' she screamed at her physician. 'Please, Mr. Macondray, here — give him to me, *please!*'

"Mr. Macondray held the frog out to her. She seized it eagerly. 'Ah! Ah! Look at him! From inside my own stomach! And he is such a *dear* little thing!'

"She raised the little creature to her lips, and kissed it passionately—

"And that, Roland, was when it happened. There was a sudden, terribly brilliant puff of light, dazzling all of us. Blinking, we saw that the green frog had vanished. Instead, beside the bed, leaning very slightly toward the duchess, was the most beautiful young man I'd ever seen. Of more than middle height, his hair was golden, his eyes glowed like sapphires, and his patrician features radiated courage and kindliness. He wore evening clothes, beautifully tailored in the style of *la Belle Epoque.*

" '*My G-God!*' gasped Mr. Bell. '*Th-the Frog Prince!*'

"The prince turned his head, and frowned at him disdainfully. Then he took the hands of the old duchess in his own. '*Merci!*' he whispered. 'After so many years, you have freed me! *Ma princesse, merci!*' And, leaning forward, he kissed her wrinkled forehead.

"Once more, abruptly, there came that puff of light. Once more we looked — and now, where that fat old woman had been lying in her lace and

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linen, we saw a girl. She was dark, dark, perhaps Hungarian, possibly Spanish. Her beauty was so rich that it could not have been unflawed — and yet it was. She was clad in a scandalous First Empire gown of white and gold, revealing absolutely all of it.

"He took her in his arms. Gently, he lifted her. Her lovely arms went around his neck. They kissed, and kissed again. He turned to Mr. Macondray and to me. '*Monsieur,*' he said, 'and you also, *Mademoiselle, je vous remerci!* I shall remember. I shall not forget!'

"Then, lightly, he bore her from the room, and I heard his footsteps down the corridor to the staircase. In the window, we saw what must have been another, even larger, puff of light — and suddenly I knew exactly what had happened to that small pumpkin Mr. Bell had thrown out.

"There were several minutes, I think, of utter, utter silence. Lord Woolsey Havell seemed to be in shock. Mr. Macondray simply stood there, alternately looking down at his hands and at the now-empty bed. No one was cautioned not to say a word. All of us knew that, in our world of hardened certainties, anyone daring to tell such a tale in all seriousness would have been deemed mad — and that it would have meant the death of our careers. None of us, except quite accidentally Mr. Bell, thought of looking out of the window down into the garden, and he told me later that, for an instant, he had glimpsed a small carriage and pair driving swiftly out toward the gate. But a few days later, we heard that Lord Havell had informed the press that the dowager duchess of Clayne was recuperating on the Continent."

Aunt Edith smiled at me. She rose and made us two more drinks. "We can have tea afterwards," she said. "And now do you want to tell me that you don't believe me, Rollie? Now can you believe that when you're gathering stories, some of the most magical, those that are really full of the beautiful irrationality of magic, won't ever be told to you? Or, if they are, by children or by people who are 'touched,' you yourself won't dare to credit them?"

"Auntie Edith," I told her honestly, "part of me does believe you, but part does not. Whether I print or do not print your story will depend on which part wins, and possibly on what other stories like it come along. But I do thank you for it. As the Frog Prince said, '*Princesse, merci, merci.*' "

After that we talked about the book a little longer, and then, during tea, about Catherine and her family, and our own war experiences, and all the subjects in which we found a mutual interest. She was delightful, just as Catherine and the constable had said she would be, and I knew that after I was married we'd probably see a lot of her, and I looked forward to it. Finally, I realized that the afternoon had almost ended, and that I would be wise

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not to try to make London that night, but to stay over at the hotel in Surbaston instead. I told her so, and turned down her immediate offer of her guest room.

"No," I said, "that'd be unfair. But I've an idea. Why can't you ride into Surbaston with me, and I'll make sure of a room there. Then we can have dinner and another talk, and afterwards I'll drive you home again."

We had both risen, and she walked me to the door. "Thank you, Roland," she answered, "that would be delightful. But I can't, really. It's — well, it's almost evening, and such a lovely day for *them*, and soon they'll be coming out, and — well, no, I just can't."

At the door, I kissed her cheek and we exchanged good-byes, and she was standing there as I drove off.

I looked back just before I left. She was standing there, but she was not watching me. All her attention was on her garden and its ponds and pools, now again being kissed by the sweet, gentle rain; and I saw the expression on her face — the look of wonder, of yearning, of endless expectation.

It was only then that, suddenly, I believed every word she'd said.

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This story imposes a great fantasy theme over the horror of a Nazi death camp. It was published in a non-SF magazine in 1982, and we felt it was such a strong and important piece that we wanted to bring it to the SF audience.

Down Among the Dead Men

BY

GARDNER DOZOIS and JACK DANN

Bruckman first discovered that Wernecke was a vampire when they went to the quarry that morning.

He was bending down to pick up a large rock when he thought he heard something in the gully nearby. He looked around and saw Wernecke huddled over a *Musselmänn*, one of the walking dead, a new man who had not been able to wake up to the terrible reality of the camp.

"Do you need any help?" Bruckman asked Wernecke in a low voice.

Wernecke looked up, startled, and covered his mouth with his hand, as if he were signing to Bruckman to be quiet.

But Bruckman was certain that he had glimpsed blood smeared on Wernecke's mouth. "The *Musselmänn*, is he alive?" Wernecke had often risked his own life to save one or another of the men in his barracks. But to risk one's life for a *Musselmänn?* "What's wrong?"

"Get away."

All right, Bruckman thought. Best to leave him alone. He looked pale, perhaps it was typhus. The guards were working him hard enough, and Wernecke was older than the rest of the men in the work gang. Let him sit for a moment and rest. But what about that blood...?

"Hey, you, what are you doing?" one of the young SS guards shouted to Bruckman.

Bruckman picked up the rock and, as if he had not heard the guard, began to walk away from the gully, toward the rusty brown cart on the tracks that led back to the barbed-wire fence of the camp. He would try to draw the guard's attention away from Wernecke.

But the guard shouted at him to

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halt. "Were you taking a little rest, is that it?" he asked, and Bruckman tensed, ready for a beating. This guard was new, neatly and cleanly dressed — and an unknown quantity. He walked over to the gully and, seeing Wernecke and the *Musselmänn*, said, "Aha, so your friend is taking care of the sick." He motioned Bruckman to follow him into the gully.

Bruckman had done the unpardonable — he had brought it on Wernecke. He swore at himself. He had been in this camp long enough to know to keep his mouth shut.

The guard kicked Wernecke sharply in the ribs. "I want you to put the *Musselmänn* in the cart. Now!" He kicked Wernecke again, as if as an afterthought. Wernecke groaned, but got to his feet. "Help him put the *Musselmann* in the cart," the guard said to Brockman; then he smiled and drew a circle in the air — the sign of smoke, the smoke which rose from the tall gray chimneys behind them. This *Musselmänn* would be in the oven within an hour, his ashes soon to be floating in the hot, stale air, as if they were the very particles of his soul.

Wernecke kicked the *Musselmänn*, and the guard chuckled, waved to another guard who had been watching, and stepped back a few feet. He stood with his hands on his hips. "Come on, dead man, get up or you're going to die in the oven," Wernecke whispered as he tried to pull the man to his feet. Bruckman supported the unsteady *Musselmänn*, who began to wail softly. Wernecke slapped him hard. "Do you want to live, *Musselmann?* Do you want to see your family again, feel the touch of a woman, smell grass after it's been mowed? Then *move*." The *Musselmänn* shambled forward between Wernecke and Bruckman. "You're dead, aren't you *Musselmänn*," goaded Wernecke. "As dead as your father and mother, as dead as your sweet wife, if you ever had one, aren't you? Dead!"

The *Musselmänn* groaned, shook his head, and whispered, "Not dead, my wife..."

"Ah, it talks," Wernecke said, loud enough so the guard walking a step behind them could hear. "Do you have a name, corpse?"

"Josef, and I'm not a *Musselmänn*."

"The corpse says he's alive," Wernecke said, again loud enough for the SS guard to hear. Then in a whisper, he said, "Josef, if you're not a *Musselmänn*, then you must work now, do you understand?" Josef tripped, and Bruckman caught him. "Let him be," said Wernecke. "Let him walk to the cart himself."

"Not the cart," Josef mumbled. "Not to die, not—"

"Then get down and pick up stones, show the fart-eating guard you can work."

"Can't. I'm sick, I'm...."

"*Musselmänn!*"

Josef bent down, fell to his knees, but took hold of a stone and stood up.

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"You see," Wernecke said to the guard, "it's not dead yet. It can still work."

"I told you to carry him to the cart, didn't I," the guard said petulantly.

"Show him you can work," Wernecke said to Josef, "or you'll surely be smoke."

And Josef stumbled away from Wernecke and Bruckman, leaning forward, as if following the rock he was carrying.

"Bring him *back!*" shouted the guard, but his attention was distracted from Josef by some other prisoners, who, sensing the trouble, began to mill about. One of the other guards began to shout and kick at the men on the periphery, and the new guard joined him. For the moment, he had forgotten about Josef.

"Let's get to work, lest they notice us again," Wernecke said.

"I'm sorry that I—"

Wernecke laughed and made a fluttering gesture with his hand — smoke rising. "It's all hazard, my friend. All luck." Again the laugh. "It was a venial sin," and his face seemed to darken. "Never do it again, though, lest I think of you as bad luck."

"Carl, are you all right?" Bruckman asked. "I noticed some blood when—"

"Do the sores on your feet bleed in the morning?" Wernecke countered angrily. Bruckman nodded, feeling foolish and embarrassed. "And so it is with my gums. Now go away, unlucky one, and let me live."

* * *

At dusk, the guards broke the hypnosis of lifting and grunting and sweating and formed the prisoners into ranks. They marched back to the camp through the fields, beside the railroad tracks, the electrified wire, conical towers, and into the main gate of the camp.

Joseph walked beside them, but he kept stumbling, as he was once again slipping back into death, becoming a *Musselmänn*. Wernecke helped him walk, pushed him along. "We should let this man become dead," Wernecke said to Bruckman.

Bruckman only nodded, but he felt a chill sweep over his sweating back. He was seeing Wernecke's face again as it was for that instant in the morning. Smeared with blood.

Yes, Bruckman thought, we should let the *Musselmänn* become dead. We should all be dead....

Wernecke served up the lukewarm water with bits of spoiled turnip floating on the top, what passed as soup for the prisoners. Everyone sat or kneeled on the rough-planked floor, as there were no chairs.

Bruckman ate his portion, counting the sips and the bites, forcing himself to take his time. Later, he would take a very small bite of the bread he had in his pocket. He always saved a small morsel of food for later — in the endless world of the camp, he had learned to give himself things to look forward to. Better to dream of bread than to get

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lost in the present. That was the fate of the *Musselmänner*.

But he always dreamed of food. Hunger was with him every moment of the day and night. Those times when he actually ate were in a way the most difficult, for there was never enough to satisfy him. There was the taste of softness in his mouth, and then in an instant it was gone. The emptiness took the form of pain — it *hurt* to eat. For bread, he thought, he would have killed his father, or his wife. God forgive me, and he watched Wernecke — Wernecke, who had shared his bread with him, who had died a little so he could live. He's a better man than I, Bruckman thought.

It was dim inside the barracks. A bare light bulb hung from the ceiling and cast sharp shadows across the cavernous room. Two tiers of five-foot-deep shelves ran around the room on three sides, bare wooden shelves where the men slept without blankets or mattresses. Set high in the northern wall was a slatted window, which let in the stark white light of the kliegs. Outside, the lights turned the grounds into a deathly imitation of day; only inside the barracks was it night.

"Do you know what tonight is, my friends?" Wernecke asked. He sat in the far corner of the room with Josef, who, hour by hour, was reverting back into a *Musselmänn*. Wernecke's face looked hollow and drawn in the light from the window and the light bulb; his eyes were deep-set and his face was long with deep creases running from his nose to the corners of his thin mouth. His hair was black, and even since Bruckman had known him, quite a bit of it had fallen out. He was a very tall man, almost six foot four, and that made him stand out in a crowd, which was dangerous in a death camp. But Wernecke had his own secret ways of blending with the crowd, of making himself invisible.

"No, tell us what tonight is," crazy old Bohme said. That men such as Bohme could survive was a miracle — or, as Bruckman thought — a testament to men such as Wernecke who somehow found the strength to help the others live.

"It's Passover," Wernecke said.

"How does he know that?" someone mumbled, but it didn't matter how Wernecke knew because he *knew* — even if it really wasn't Passover by the calendar. In this dimly lit barrack, it *was* Passover, the feast of freedom, the time of thanksgiving.

"But how can we have Passover without a *sedar?*" asked Bohme. "We don't even have any *matzah*," he whined.

"Nor do we have candles, or a silver cup for Elijah, or the shankbone, or *hoarset* — nor would I make a *sedar* over the *traif* the Nazis are so generous in giving us," replied Wernecke with a smile. "But we can pray, can't we? And when we all get out of here, when we're in our own homes in the coming year with God's help, then we'll have

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twice as much food — two *afilomens*, a bottle of wine for Elijah, and the *haggadahs* that our fathers and our fathers' fathers used."

It *was* Passover.

"Isadore, do you remember the four questions?" Wernecke asked Bruckman.

And Bruckman heard himself speaking. He was twelve years old again at the long table beside his father, who sat in the seat of honor. To sit next to him was itself an honor. "How does this night differ from all other nights? On all other nights we eat bread and *matzah;* why on this night do we eat only *matzah?*

"M'a nisht'ana halylah hazeah...."

Sleep would not come to Bruckman that night, although he was so tired that he felt as if the marrow of his bones had been sucked away and replaced with lead.

He lay there in the semidarkness, feeling his muscles ache, feeling the acid biting of his hunger. Usually he was numb enough with exhaustion that he could empty his mind, close himself down, and fall rapidly into oblivion, but not tonight. Tonight he was noticing things again, his surroundings were getting through to him again, in a way that they had not since he had been new in camp. It was smotheringly hot, and the air was filled with the stinks of death and sweat and fever, of stale urine and drying blood. The sleepers thrashed and turned, as though they fought with sleep, and as they slept, many of them talked or muttered or screamed aloud; they lived other lives in their dreams, intensely compressed lives dreamed quickly, for soon it would be dawn, and once more they would be thrust into hell. Cramped in the midst of them, sleepers squeezed in all around him, it suddenly seemed to Bruckman that these pallid white bodies were already dead, that he was sleeping in a graveyard. Suddenly it was the boxcar again. And his wife Miriam was dead again, dead and rotting unburied....

Resolutely, Bruckman emptied his mind. He felt feverish and shaky, and wondered if the typhus were coming back, but he couldn't afford to worry about it. Those who couldn't sleep couldn't survive. Regulate your breathing, force your muscles to relax, don't think. Don't think.

For some reason, after he had managed to banish even the memory of his dead wife, he couldn't shake the image of the blood on Wernecke's mouth.

There were other images mixed in with it: Wernecke's uplifted arms and upturned face as he lead them in prayer; the pale strained face of the stumbling *Musselmänn;* Wernecke looking up, startled, as he crouched over Josef ... but it was the blood to which Bruckman's feverish thoughts returned, and he pictured it again and again as he lay in the rustling, fart-smelling darkness: the watery sheen of blood over Wernecke's lips, the tarry trickle

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of blood in the corner of his mouth, like a tiny scarlet worm....

Just then a shadow crossed in front of the window, silhouetted blackly for an instant against the harsh white glare, and Bruckman knew from the shadow's height and its curious forward stoop that it was Wernecke.

Where could he be going? Sometimes a prisoner would be unable to wait until morning, when the Germans would let them out to visit the slit-trench latrine again, and would slink shamefacedly into a far corner to piss against a wall, but surely Wernecke was too much of an old hand for that.... Most of the prisoners slept on the sleeping platforms, especially during the cold nights when they would huddle together for warmth, but sometimes during the hot weather, people would drift away and sleep on the floor instead; Bruckman had been thinking of doing that, as the jostling bodies of the sleepers around him helped to keep him from sleep. Perhaps Wernecke, who always had trouble fitting into the cramped sleeping niches, was merely looking for a place where he could lie down and stretch his legs....

Then Bruckman remembered that Josef had fallen asleep in the corner of the room where Wernecke had sat and prayed, and that they had left him there alone.

Without knowing why, Bruckman found himself on his feet. As silently as the ghost he sometimes felt he was becoming, he walked across the room in the direction Wernecke had gone, not understanding what he was doing nor why he was doing it. The face of the *Musselmänn*, Josef, seemed to float behind his eyes. Bruckman's feet hurt, and he knew, without looking, that they were bleeding, leaving faint tracks behind him. It was dimmer here in the far corner, away from the window, but Bruckman knew that he must be near the wall by now, and he stopped to let his eyes readjust.

When his eyes had adapted to the dimmer light, he saw Josef sitting on the floor, propped up against the wall. Wernecke was hunched over the *Musselmänn*. Kissing him. One of Josef's hands was tangled in Wernecke's thinning hair.

Before Bruckman could react — such things had been known to happen once or twice before, although it shocked him deeply that *Wernecke* would be involved in such filth — Josef released his grip on Wernecke's hair. Josef's upraised arm fell limply to the side, his hand hitting the floor with a muffled but solid impact that should have been painful — but Josef made no sound.

Wernecke straightened up and turned around. Stronger light from the high window caught him as he straightened to his full height, momentarily illuminating his face.

Wernecke's mouth was smeared with blood.

"My God," Bruckman cried.

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Startled, Wernecke flinched, then took two quick steps forward and seized Bruckman by the arm. "Quiet!" Wernecke hissed. His fingers were cold and hard.

At that moment, as though Wernecke's sudden movement were a cue, Josef began to slip down sideways along the wall. As Wernecke and Bruckman watched, both momentarily riveted by the sight, Josef toppled over to the floor, his head striking against the floorboards with a sound such as a dropped melon might make. He had made no attempt to break his fall or cushion his head, and lay now unmoving.

"My *God*," Bruckman said again.

"Quiet, I'll explain," Wernecke said, his lips still glazed with the *Musselmänn's* blood. "Do you want to ruin us all? For the love of God, be *quiet*."

But Bruckman had shaken free of Wernecke's grip and crossed to kneel by Josef, leaning over him as Wernecke had done, placing a hand flat on Josef's chest for a moment, then touching the side of Josef's neck. Bruckman looked slowly up at Wernecke. "He's dead," Bruckman said, more quietly.

Wernecke squatted on the other side of Josef's body, and the rest of their conversation was carried out in whispers over Josef's chest, like friends conversing at the sickbed of another friend who has finally fallen into a fitful doze.

"Yes, he's dead," Wernecke said. "He was dead yesterday, wasn't he? Today he had just stopped walking." His eyes were hidden here, in the deeper shadow nearer to the floor, but there was still enough light for Bruckman to see that Wernecke had wiped his lips clean. Or licked them clean, Bruckman thought, and felt a spasm of nausea go through him.

"But *you*," Bruckman said, haltingly. "You were...."

"Drinking his blood?" Wernecke said. "Yes, I was drinking his blood."

Bruckman's mind was numb. He couldn't deal with this, he couldn't understand it at all. "But *why*, Eduard? Why?"

"To live, of course. Why do any of us do anything here? If I am to live, I must have blood. Without it, I'd face a death even more certain than that doled out by the Nazis."

Bruckman opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out, as if the words he wished to speak were too jagged to fit through his throat. At last he managed to croak, "A vampire? You're a vampire? Like in the old stories?"

Wernecke said calmly, "Men would call me that," He paused, then nodded. "Yes, that's what men would call me.... As though they can understand something simply by giving it a name."

"But Eduard," Bruckman said weakly, almost petulantly. "The *Musselmänn*...."

"Remember that he *was* a *Musselmänn*," Wernecke said, leaning forward and speaking more fiercely. "His

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strength was going, he was sinking. He would have been dead by morning anyway. I took from him something that he no longer needed, but that I needed in order to live. Does it matter? Starving men in lifeboats have eaten the bodies of their dead companions in order to live. Is what I've done any worse than that?"

"But he didn't just die. You *killed* him...."

Wernecke was silent for a moment, and then said, quietly, "What better thing could I have done for him? I won't apologize for what I do, Isadore; I do what I have to do to live. Usually I take only a little blood from a number of men, just enough to survive. And that's fair, isn't it? Haven't I given food to others, to help them survive? To *you*, Isadore? Only very rarely do I take more than a minimum from any one man, although I'm weak and hungry all the time, believe me. And never have I drained the life from someone who wished to live. Instead I've helped them fight for survival in every way I can, you know that."

He reached out as though to touch Bruckman, then thought better of it and put his hand back on his own knee. He shook his head. "But these *Musselmänner*, the ones who have given up on life, the walking dead — it is a favor to them to take them, to give them the solace of death. Can you honestly say it is not, *here?* That it is better for them to walk around while they are dead, being beaten and abused by the Nazis until their bodies cannot go on, and then to be thrown into the ovens and burned like trash? Can you say that? Would *they* say that, if they knew what was going on? Or would they thank me?"

Wernecke suddenly stood up, and Bruckman stood up with him. As Wernecke's face came again into the stronger light, Bruckman could see that his eyes had filled with tears. "You have lived under the Nazis," Wernecke said. "Can you really call *me* a monster? Aren't I still a Jew, whatever else I might be? Aren't I *here*, in a death camp? Aren't I being persecuted, too, as much as any other? Aren't I in as much danger as anyone else? If I'm not a Jew, then tell the Nazis — they seem to think so." He paused for a moment, and then smiled wryly. "And forget your superstitious boogey tales. I'm no night spirit. If I could turn myself into a bat and fly away from here, I would have done it long before now, believe me."

Bruckman smiled reflectively, then grimaced. The two men avoided each other's eyes, Bruckman looking at the floor, and there was an uneasy silence, punctured only by the sighing and moaning of the sleepers on the other side of the cabin. Then, without looking up, in tacit surrender, Bruckman said, "What about *him?* The Nazis will find the body and cause trouble...."

"Don't worry," Wernecke said. "There are no obvious marks. And nobody performs autopsies in a death

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camp. To the Nazis, he'll be just another Jew who had died of the heat, or from starvation or sickness, or from a broken heart."

Bruckman raised his head then and they stared eye to eye for a moment. Even knowing what he knew, Bruckman found it hard to see Wernecke as anything other than what he appeared to be: an aging, balding Jew, stooping and thin, with sad eyes and a tired, compassionate face.

"Well, then, Isadore," Wernecke said at last, matter-of-factly. "My life is in your hands. I will not be indelicate enough to remind you of how many times your life has been in mine."

Then he was gone, walking back toward the sleeping platforms, a shadow soon lost among other shadows.

Bruckman stood by himself in the gloom for a long time, and then followed him. It took all of his will not to look back over his shoulder at the corner where Josef lay, and even so Bruckman imagined that he could feel Josef's dead eyes watching him, watching him reproachfully as he walked away, abandoning Josef to the cold and isolated company of the dead.

Bruckman got no more sleep that night, and in the morning, when the Nazis shattered the gray predawn stillness by bursting into the shack with shouts and shrill whistles and barking police dogs, he felt as if he were a thousand years old.

They were formed into two lines, shivering in the raw morning air, and marched off to the quarry. The clammy dawn mist had yet to burn off, and, marching through it, through a white shadowless void, with only the back of the man in front of him dimly visible, Bruckman felt more than ever like a ghost, suspended bodiless in some limbo between Heaven and Earth. Only the bite of pebbles and cinders into his raw, bleeding feet kept him anchored to the world, and he clung to the pain as a lifeline, fighting to shake off a feeling of numbness and unreality. However strange, however outré, the events of the previous night had *happened*. To doubt it, to wonder now if it had all been a feverish dream brought on by starvation and exhaustion, was to take the first step on the road to becoming a *Musselmänn*.

Wernecke is a vampire, he told himself. That was the harsh, unyielding reality that, like the reality of the camp itself, must be faced. Was it any more surreal, any more impossible, than the nightmare around them? He must forget the tales his old grandmother had told him as a boy, "boogey tales" as Wernecke himself had called them, half-remembered tales that turned his knees to water whenever he thought of the blood smeared on Wernecke's mouth, whenever he thought of Wernecke's eyes watching him in the dark....

"Wake up, Jew!" the guard alongside him snarled, whacking him lightly

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on the arm with his rifle butt. Bruckman stumbled, managed to stay upright and keep going. Yes, he thought, wake up. Wake up to the reality of this, just as you once had to wake up to the reality of the camp. It was just one more unpleasant fact he would have to adapt to, learn to deal with....

Deal with how? he thought, and shivered.

By the time they reached the quarry, the mist had burned off, swirling past them in rags and tatters, and it was already beginning to get hot. There was Wernecke, his balding head gleaming dully in the harsh morning light. He didn't dissolve in the sunlight — there was one boogey tale disproved....

They set to work, like golems, like ragtag clockwork automatons.

Lack of sleep had drained what small reserves of strength Bruckman had, and the work was very hard for him that day. He had learned long ago all the tricks of timing and misdirection, the safe way to snatch short moments of rest, the ways to do a minimum of work with the maximum display of effort, the ways to keep the guards from noticing you, to fade into the faceless crowd of prisoners and not be singled out, but today his head was muzzy and slow, and none of the tricks seemed to work.

His body felt like a sheet of glass, fragile, ready to shatter into dust, and the painful, arthritic slowness of his movements got him first shouted at, and then knocked down. The guard kicked him twice for good measure before he could get up.

When Bruckman had climbed back to his feet again, he saw that Wernecke was watching him, face blank, eyes expressionless, a look that could have meant anything at all.

Bruckman felt the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth and thought, *the blood ... he's watching the blood ...* and once again he shivered.

Somehow, Bruckman forced himself to work faster, and although his muscles blazed with pain, he wasn't hit again, and the day passed.

When they formed up to go back to camp, Bruckman, almost unconsciously, made sure that he was in a different line than Wernecke.

That night in the cabin, Bruckman watched as Wernecke talked with the other men, here trying to help a new man named Melnick — no more than a boy — adjust to the dreadful reality of the camp, there exhorting someone who was slipping into despair to live and spite his tormentors, joking with old hands in the flat, black, bitter way that passed for humor among them, eliciting a wan smile or occasionally even a laugh from them, finally leading them all in prayer again, his strong, calm voice raised in the ancient words, giving meaning to those words again....

He keeps us together, Bruckman thought, he keeps us going. Without

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him, we wouldn't last a week. Surely that's worth a little blood, a bit from each man, not even enough to hurt.... Surely they wouldn't even begrudge him it, if they knew and really understood.... No, he *is* a good man, better than the rest of us, in spite of his terrible affliction.

Bruckman had been avoiding Wernecke's eyes, hadn't spoken to him at all that day, and suddenly felt a wave of shame go through him at the thought of how shabbily he had been treating his friend. Yes, his friend, regardless, the man who had saved his life.... Deliberately, he caught Wernecke's eyes, and nodded, and then somewhat sheepishly, smiled. After a moment, Wernecke smiled back, and Bruckman felt a spreading warmth and relief uncoil his guts. Everything was going to be all right, as all right as it could be, here....

Nevertheless, as soon as the inside lights clicked off that night, and Bruckman found himself lying alone in the darkness, his flesh began to crawl.

He had been unable to keep his eyes open a moment before, but now, in the sudden darkness, he found himself tensely and tickingly awake. Where was Wernecke? What was he doing, whom was he visiting tonight? Was he out there in the darkness even now, creeping closer, creeping nearer...? Stop it, Bruckman told himself uneasily, forget the boogey tales. This is your friend, a good man, not a monster.... But he couldn't control the fear that made the small hairs on his arms stand bristlingly erect, couldn't stop the grisly images from coming....

Wernecke's eyes, gleaming in the darkness ... was the blood already glistening on Wernecke's lips, as he drank...? The thought of the blood staining Wernecke's yellowing teeth made Bruckman cold and nauseous, but the image that he couldn't get out of his mind tonight was an image of Josef toppling over in that sinister boneless way, striking his head against the floor.... Bruckman had seen people die in many more gruesome ways during this time at the camp, seen people shot, beaten to death, seen them die in convulsions from high fevers or cough their lungs up in bloody tatters from pneumonia, seen them hanging like charred-black scarecrows from the electrified fences, seen them torn apart by dogs ... but somehow it was Josef's soft, passive, almost restful slumping into death that bothered him. That, and the obscene limpness of Josef's limbs as he sprawled there like a discarded rag doll, his pale and haggard face gleaming reproachfully in the dark....

When Bruckman could stand it no longer, he got shakily to his feet and moved off through the shadows, once again not knowing where he was going or what he was going to do, but drawn forward by some obscure instinct he himself did not understand. This time he went cautiously, feeling his way and trying to be silent, expecting every second to see Wernecke's coal-black shad-

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ow rise up before him.

He paused, a faint noise scratching at his ears, then went on again, even more cautiously, crouching low, almost crawling across the grimy floor.

Whatever instinct had guided him — sounds heard and interpreted subliminally, perhaps? — it had timed his arrival well. Wernecke had someone down on the floor there, perhaps someone he seized and dragged away from the huddled mass of sleepers on one of the sleeping platforms, someone from the outer edge of bodies whose presence would not be missed, or perhaps someone who had gone to sleep on the floor, seeking solitude or greater comfort.

Whoever he was, he struggled in Wernecke's grip, but Wernecke handled him easily, almost negligently, in a manner that spoke of great physical power. Bruckman could hear the man trying to scream, but Wernecke had one hand on his throat, half-throttling him, and all that would come out was a sort of whistling gasp. The man thrashed in Wernecke's hands like a kite in a child's hands flapping in the wind, and, moving deliberately, Wernecke smoothed him out like out like a kite, pressing him slowly flat on the floor.

Then Wernecke bent over him, and lowered his mouth to his throat.

Bruckman watched in horror, knowing that he should shout, scream, try to rouse the other prisoners, but somehow unable to move, unable to make his mouth open, his lungs pump. He was paralyzed by fear, like a rabbit in the presence of a predator, a terror sharper and more intense than any he'd ever known.

The man's struggles were growing weaker, and Wernecke must have eased up some on the throttling pressure of his hand, because the man moaned "Don't ... please don't...." in a weaker, slurred voice. The man had been drumming his fists against Wernecke's back and sides, but now the tempo of the drumming slowed, slowed, and then stopped, the man's arms falling laxly to the floor. "Don't...." the man whispered; he groaned and muttered incomprehensively for a moment or two longer, then became silent. The silence stretched out for a minute, two, three, and Wernecke still crouched over his victim, who was now not moving at all....

Wernecke stirred, a kind of shudder going through him, like a cat stretching. He stood up. His face became visible as he straightened up into the full light from the window, and there was blood on it, glistening black under the harsh glare of the kliegs. As Bruckman watched, Wernecke began to lick his lips clean, his tongue, also black in this light, sliding like some sort of sinuous ebony snake around the rim of his mouth, darting and probing for the last lingering drops....

How smug he looks, Bruckman thought, like a cat who has found the

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cream, and the anger that flashed through him at the thought enabled him to move and speak again. "Wernecke," he said harshly.

Wernecke glanced casually in his direction. "You again, Isadore?" Wernecke said. "Don't you ever sleep?" Wernecke spoke lazily, quizzically, without surprise, and Bruckman wondered if Wernecke had known all along that he was there. "Or do you just enjoy watching me?"

"Lies," Bruckman said. "You told me nothing but lies. Why did you bother?"

"You were excited," Wernecke said. "You had surprised me. It seemed best to tell you what you wanted to hear. If it satisfied you, then that was an easy solution to the problem."

"Never have I drained the life from someone who wanted to live," Bruckman said bitterly, mimicking Wernecke. "Only a little from each man! My God — and I believed you! I even felt sorry for you!"

Wernecke shrugged. "Most of it *was* true. Usually I only take a little from each man, softly and carefully, so that they never know, so that in the morning they are only a little weaker than they would have been anyway...."

"Like Josef?" Bruckman said angrily. "Like the poor devil you killed tonight?"

Wernecke shrugged again. "I have been careless the last few nights, I admit. But I need to build up my strength again." His eyes gleamed in the darkness. "Events are coming to a head here. Can't you feel it, Isadore, can't you sense it? Soon the war will be over, everyone knows that. Before then, this camp will be shut down, and the Nazis will move us back into the interior — either that, or kill us. I have grown weak here, and I will soon need all my strength to survive, to take whatever opportunity presents itself to escape. I *must* be ready. And so I have let myself drink deeply again, drink my fill for the first time in months...." Wernecke licked his lips again, perhaps unconsciously, then smiled bleakly at Bruckman. "You don't appreciate my restraint, Isadore. You don't understand how hard it has been for me to hold back, to take only a little each night. You don't understand how much that restraint has cost me...."

"You are gracious," Bruckman sneered.

Wernecke laughed. "No, but I am a rational man; I pride myself on that. You other prisoners were my only source of food, and I have had to be very careful to make sure that you would last. I have no access to the Nazis, after all. I *am* trapped here, a prisoner just like you, whatever else you may believe — and I have not only had to find ways to survive here in the camp, I have had to procure my own food as well! No shepherd has ever watched over his flock more tenderly than I."

"Is that all we are to you — sheep?

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Animals to be slaughtered?"

Wernecke smiled. "Precisely."

When he could control his voice enough to speak, Bruckman said, "You're worse than the Nazis."

"I hardly think so," Wernecke said quietly, and for a moment he looked tired, as though something unimaginably old and unutterly weary had looked out through his eyes. "This camp was built by the Nazis — it wasn't *my* doing. The Nazis sent you here — not I. The Nazis have tried to kill you every day since, in one way or another — and I have tried to keep you alive, even at some risk to myself. No one has more of a vested interest in the survival of his livestock than the farmer, after all, even if he does occasionally slaughter an inferior animal. I have given you food—"

"Food you had no use for yourself! You sacrificed nothing!"

"That's true, of course. But *you* needed it, remember that. Whatever my motives, I have helped you to survive here — you and many others. By doing so I also acted in my own self-interest, of course, but can you have experienced this camp and still believe in things like altruism? What difference does it make what my reason for helping was — I still helped you, didn't I?"

"Sophistries!" Bruckman said. "Rationalizations! You twist words to justify yourself, but you can't disguise what you really are — a monster!"

Wernecke smiled gently, as though Bruckman's words amused him, and made as if to pass by, but Bruckman raised an arm to bar his way. They did not touch each other, but Wernecke stopped short, and a new quivering kind of tension sprung into existence in the air between them.

"I'll stop you," Bruckman said. "Somehow I'll stop you, I'll keep you from doing this terrible thing—"

"You'll do nothing," Wernecke said. His voice was hard and cold and flat, like a rock speaking. "What can you do? Tell the other prisoners? Who would believe you? They'd think you'd gone insane. Tell the *Nazis*, then?" Wernecke laughed harshly. "They'd think you'd gone crazy, too, and they'd take you to the hospital — and I don't have to tell you what your chances of getting out of there alive are, do I? No, you'll do *nothing*."

Wernecke took a step forward; his eyes were shiny and black and hard, like ice, like the pitiless eyes of a predatory bird, and Bruckman felt a sick rush of fear cut through his anger. Bruckman gave way, stepping backward involuntarily, and Wernecke pushed past him, seeming to brush him aside without touching him.

Once past, Wernecke turned to stare at Bruckman, and Bruckman had to summon up all the defiance that remained in him not to look uneasily away from Wernecke's agate-hard eyes. "You are the strongest and cleverest of all the other animals, Isadore," Wernecke said in a calm, conversational voice. "You have been useful to me.

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Every shepherd needs a good sheepdog. I still need you, to help me manage the others, and to help me keep them going long enough to serve my needs. This is the reason why I have taken so much time with you, instead of just killing you outright." He shrugged. "So let us both be rational about this — you leave me alone, Isadore, and I will leave you alone also. We will stay away from each other and look after our own affairs. Yes?"

"The others...." Bruckman said weakly.

"They must look after themselves," Wernecke said. He smiled, a thin and almost invisible motion of his lips. "What did I teach you, Isadore? Here everyone must look after themselves. What difference does it make what happens to the others? In a few weeks almost all of them will be dead anyway."

"You *are* a monster," Bruckman said.

"I'm not much difference from you, Isadore. The strong survive, whatever the cost."

"I am *nothing* like you," Bruckman said, with loathing.

"No?" Wernecke asked, ironically, and moved away; within a few paces he was hobbling and stooping, vanishing into the shadows, once more the harmless old Jew.

Bruckman stood motionless for a moment, and then, moving slowly and reluctantly, he stepped across to where Wernecke's victim lay.

It was one of new men Wernecke had been talking to earlier in the evening, and, of course, he was quite dead.

Shame and guilt took Bruckman then, emotions he thought he had forgotten — black and strong and bitter, they shook him by the throat the way Wernecke had shaken the new man.

Bruckman couldn't remember returning across the room to his sleeping platform, but suddenly he was there, lying on his back and staring into the stifling darkness, surrounded by the moaning, thrashing, stinking mass of sleepers. His hands were clasped protectively over his throat, although he couldn't remember putting them there, and he was shivering convulsively. How many mornings had he awoken with a dull ache in his neck, thinking it was no more than the habitual body-aches and strained muscles they had all learned to take for granted? How many nights had Wernecke fed on *him?*

Every time Bruckman closed his eyes he would see Wernecke's face floating there in the luminous darkness behind his eyelids ... Wernecke with his eyes half-closed, his face vulpine and cruel and satiated ... Wernecke's face moving closer and closer to him, his eyes opening like black pits, his lips smiling back from his teeth ... Wernecke's lips, sticky and red with blood ... and then Bruckman would seem to feel the wet touch of Wernecke's lips on *his* throat, feel Wernecke's teeth bit-

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ing into *his* flesh, and Bruckman's eyes would fly open again. Staring into the darkness. Nothing there. Nothing there *yet*....

Dawn was a dirty gray imminence against the cabin window before Bruckman could force himself to lower his shielding arms from his throat, and once again he had not slept at all.

That day's work was a nightmare of pain and exhaustion for Bruckman, harder than anything he had known since his first few days at the camp. Somehow he forced himself to get up, somehow he stumbled outside and up the path to the quarry, seeming to float along high off the ground, his head a bloated balloon, his feet a thousand miles away at the end of boneless beanstalk legs he could barely control at all. Twice he fell, and was kicked several times before he could drag himself back to his feet and lurch forward again. The sun was coming up in front of them, a hard red disk in a sickly yellow sky, and to Bruckman it seemed to be a glazed and lidless eye staring dispassionately into the world to watch them flail and struggle and die, like the eye of a scientist peering into a laboratory maze.

He watched the disk of the sun as he stumbled towards it; it seemed to bob and shimmer with every painful step, expanding, swelling, and bloating until it swallowed the sky....

Then he was picking up a rock, moaning with the effort, feeling the rough stone tear his hands....

Reality began to slide away from Bruckman. There were long periods when the world was blank, and he would come slowly back to himself as if from a great distance, and hear his own voice speaking words that he could not understand, or keening mindlessly, or grunting in a hoarse, animalistic way, and he would find that his body was working mechanically, stooping and lifting and carrying, all without volition....

A *Musselmänn*, Bruckman thought, I'm becoming a *Musselmänn* ... and felt a chill of fear sweep through him. He fought to hold onto the world, afraid that the next time he slipped away from himself he would not come back, deliberately banging his hands into the rocks, cutting himself, clearing his head with pain.

The world steadied around him. A guard shouted a hoarse admonishment at him and slapped his rifle butt, and Bruckman forced himself to work faster, although he could not keep himself from weeping silently with the pain his movements cost him.

He discovered that Wernecke was watching him, and stared back defiantly, the bitter tears still runneling his dirty cheeks, thinking, *I won't become a* Musselmänn *for you, I won't make it easy for you, I won't provide another helpless victim for you* ... Wernecke met Bruckman's gaze for a moment, and then shrugged and turned away.

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Bruckman bent for another stone, feeling the muscles in his back crack and the pain drive in like knives. What had Wernecke been thinking behind the blankness of his expressionless face? Had Wernecke, sensing weakness, marked Bruckman for his next victim? Had Wernecke been disappointed or dismayed by the strength of Bruckman's will to survive? Would Wernecke now settle upon someone else?

The morning passed, and Bruckman grew feverish again. He could feel the fever in his face, making his eyes feel sandy and hot, pulling the skin taut over his cheekbones, and he wondered how long he could manage to stay on his feet. To falter, to grow weak and insensible, was certain death; if the Nazis didn't kill him, Wernecke would.... Wernecke was out of sight now, on the other side of the quarry, but it seemed to Bruckman that Wernecke's hard and flinty eyes were everywhere, floating in the air around him, looking out momentarily from the back of a Nazi soldier's head, watching him from the dulled iron side of a quarry cart, peering at him from a dozen different angles. He bent ponderously for another rock, and when he had pried it up from the earth he found Wernecke's eyes beneath it, staring unblinkingly up at him from the damp and pallid soil....

That afternoon there were great flashes of light on the eastern horizon, out across the endless flat expanse of the steppe, flares in rapid sequence that lit up the sullen gray sky, all without sound. The Nazi guards had gathered in a group, looking to the east and talking in subdued voices, ignoring the prisoners for the moment. For the first time Bruckman noticed how dishevelled and unshaven the guards had become in the last few days, as though they had given up, as though they no longer cared. Their faces were strained and tight, and more than one of them seemed to be fascinated by the leaping fires on the distant edge of the world.

Melnick said that it was only a thunderstorm, but old Bohme said that it was an artillery battle being fought, and that that meant that the Russians were coming, that soon they would all be liberated.

Bohme grew so excited at the thought that he began shouting, "The Russians! It's the Russians! The Russians are coming to free us!" Dichstein, another one of the new prisoners, and Melnick tried to hush him, but Bohme continued to caper and shout — doing a grotesque kind of jig while he yelled and flapped his arms — until he had attracted the attention of the guards. Infuriated, two of the guards fell upon Bohme and beat him severely, striking him with their rifle butts with more than usual force, knocking him to the ground, continuing to flail at him and kick him while he was down, Bohme writhing like an injured worm under their stamping boots. They probably would have beaten Bohme to death on

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the spot, but Wernecke organized a distraction among some of the other prisoners, and when the guards moved away to deal with it, Wernecke helped Bohme to stand up and hobble away to the other side of the quarry, where the rest of the prisoners shielded him from sight with their bodies as best they could for the rest of the afternoon.

Something about the way Wernecke urged Bohme to his feet and helped him to limp and lurch away, something about the protective, possessive curve of Wernecke's arm around Bohme's shoulders, told Bruckman that Wernecke had selected his next victim.

That night Bruckman vomited up the meager and rancid meal that they were allowed, his stomach convulsing uncontrollably after the first few bites. Trembling with hunger and exhaustion and fever, he leaned against the wall and watched as Wernecke fussed over Bohme, nursing him as a man might nurse a sick child, talking gently to him, wiping away some of the blood that still oozed from the corner of Bohme's mouth, coaxing Bohme to drink a few sips of soup, finally arranging that Bohme should stretch out on the floor away from the sleeping platforms, where he would not be jostled by the others....

As soon as the interior lights went out that night, Bruckman got up, crossed the floor quickly and unhesitantly, and lay down in the shadows near the spot where Bohme muttered and twitched and groaned.

Shivering, Bruckman lay in the darkness, the strong smell of earth in his nostrils, waiting for Wernecke to come....

In Bruckman's hand, held close to his chest, was a spoon that had been sharpened to a jagged needle point, a spoon he had stolen and begun to sharpen while he was still in a civilian prison in Cologne, so long ago that he almost couldn't remember, scraping it back and forth against the stone wall of his cell every night for hours, managing to keep it hidden on his person during the nightmarish ride in the sweltering boxcar, the first few terrible days at the camp, telling no one about it, not even Wernecke during the months when he'd thought of Wernecke as a kind of saint, keeping it hidden long after the possibility of escape had become too remote even to fantasize about, retaining it then more as a tangible link with the daydream country of his past than as a tool he ever actually hoped to employ, cherishing it almost as a holy relic, as a remnant of a vanished world that he otherwise might almost believe had never existed at all....

And now that it was time to use it at last, he was almost reluctant to do so, to soil it with another man's blood....

He fingered the spoon compulsively, turning it over and over; it was hard and smooth and cold, and he clenched it as tightly as he could, try-

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ing to ignore the fine tremoring of his hands.

He had to kill Wernecke....

Nausea and an odd feeling of panic flashed through Bruckman at the thought, but there was no other choice, there was no other way.... He couldn't go on like this, his strength was failing; Wernecke was killing him, as surely as he had killed the others, just by keeping him from sleeping.... And as long as Wernecke lived, he would never be safe: always there would be the chance that Wernecke would come for *him*, that Wernecke would strike as soon as his guard was down.... Would Wernecke scruple for a second to kill *him*, after all, if he thought that he could do it safely...? No, of course not.... Given the chance, Wernecke would kill him without a moment's further thought.... No, he must strike *first*....

Bruckman licked his lips uneasily. Tonight. He had to kill Wernecke *tonight*....

There was a stirring, a rustling: someone was getting up, working his way free from the mass of sleepers on one of the platforms. A shadowy figure crossed the room towards Bruckman, and Bruckman tensed, reflexively running his thumb along the jagged end of the spoon, readying himself to rise, to strike — but at the last second, the figure veered aside and stumbled toward another corner. There was a sound like rain drumming on cloth; the man swayed there for a moment, mumbling, and then slowly returned to his pallet, dragging his feet, as if he had pissed his very life away against the wall. It was not Wernecke.

Bruckman eased himself back down to the floor, his heart seeming to shake his wasted body back and forth with the force of its beating. His hand was damp with sweat. He wiped it against his tattered pants, and then clutched the spoon again....

Time seemed to stop. Bruckman waited, stretched out along the hard floorboards, the raw wood rasping his skin, dust clogging his mouth and nose, feeling as though he were already dead, a corpse laid out in the rough pine coffin, feeling eternity pile up on his chest like heavy clots of wet black earth.... Outside the hut, the kliegs blazed, banishing night, abolishing it, but here inside the hut it was night, here night survived, perhaps the only pocket of night remaining on a klieg-lit planet, the shafts of light that came in through the slatted windows only serving to accentuate the surrounding darkness, to make it greater and more puissant by comparison.... Here in the darkness, nothing ever changed ... there was only the smothering heat, and the weight of eternal darkness, and the changeless moments that could not pass because there was nothing to differentiate them one from the other....

Many times as he waited Bruckman's eyes would grow heavy and slowly close, but each time his eyes would spring open again at once, and

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he would find himself staring into the shadows for Wernecke. Sleep would no longer have him, it was a kingdom closed to him now; it spat him out each time he tried to enter it, just as his stomach now spat out the food he placed in it....

The thought of food brought Bruckman to a sharper awareness, and there in the darkness he huddled around his hunger, momentarily forgetting everything else. Never had he been so hungry.... He thought of the food he had wasted earlier in the evening, and only the last few shreds of his self-control kept him from moaning aloud.

Bohme did moan aloud then, as though unease were contagious. As Bruckman glanced at him, Bohme said, "Anya," in a clear calm voice; he mumbled a little, and then, a bit more loudly, said, "Tseitel, have you set the table yet?" and Bruckman realized that Bohme was no longer in the camp, that Bohme was back in Dusseldorf in the tiny apartment with his fat wife and his four healthy children, and Bruckman felt a pang of envy go through him, for Bohme, who had escaped.

It was at that moment that Bruckman realized that Wernecke was standing there, just beyond Bohme.

There had been no movement that Bruckman had seen. Wernecke had seemed to slowly materialize from the darkness, atom by atom, bit by incremental bit, until at some point he had been solid enough for his presence to register on Bruckman's consciousness, so that what had been only a shadow a moment before was now unmistakably Wernecke as well, however much a shadow it remained.

Bruckman's mouth went dry with terror, and it almost seemed that he could hear the voice of his dead grandmother whispering in his ears. Boogey tales ... Wernecke had said *I'm no night spirit.* Remember that he had said that....

Wernecke was almost close enough to touch. He was staring down at Bohme; his face, lit by a dusty shaft of light from the window, was cold and remote, only the total lack of expression hinting at the passion that strained and quivered behind the mask. Slowly, lingeringly, Wernecke stooped over Bohme. "Anya," Bohme said again, caressingly, and then Wernecke's mouth was on his throat.

Let him feed, said a cold remorseless voice in Bruckman's mind. It will be easier to take him when he's nearly sated, when he's fully preoccupied and growing lethargic and logy ... growing *full*....

Slowly, with infinite caution, Bruckman gathered himself to spring, watching in horror and fascination as Wernecke fed. He could hear Wernecke sucking the juice out of Bohme, as if there were not enough blood in the foolish old man to satiate him, as if there were not enough blood in the whole camp ... or perhaps, the whole world.... And now Bohme was ceasing

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his feeble struggling, was becoming still....

Bruckman flung himself upon Wernecke, stabbing him twice in the back before his weight bowled them both over. There was a moment of confusion as they rolled and struggled together, all without sound, and then Bruckman found himself sitting atop Wernecke, Wernecke's white face turned up to him. Bruckman drove his weapon into Wernecke again, the shock of the blow jarring Bruckman's arm to the shoulder. Wernecke made no outcry; his eyes were already glazing, but they looked at Bruckman with recognition, with cold anger, with bitter irony and, oddly, with what might have been resignation or relief, with what might almost have been pity....

Bruckman stabbed again and again, driving the blows home with hysterical strength, panting, rocking atop his victim, feeling Wernecke's blood spatter against his face, wrapped in the heat and steam that rose from Wernecke's torn-open body like a smothering black cloud, coughing and choking on it for a moment, feeling the steam seep in through his pores and sink deep into the marrow of his bones, feeling the world seem to pulse and shimmer and change around him, as though he were suddenly seeing through new eyes, as though something had been born anew inside him, and then abruptly he was *smelling* Wernecke's blood, the hot organic reek of it, leaning closer to drink in that sudden overpowering smell, better than the smell of freshly baked bread, better than anything he could remember, rich and heady and strong beyond imagining.

There was a moment of revulsion and horror, and he tried to wonder how long the ancient contamination had been passing from man to man to man, how far into the past the chain of lives stretched, how Wernecke himself had been trapped, and then his parched lips touched wetness, and he was drinking, drinking deeply and greedily, and his mouth was filled with the strong clean taste of copper.

The following night, after Bruckman led the memorial prayers for Wernecke and Bohme, Melnick came to him. Melnick's eyes were bright with tears. "How can we go on without Eduard? He was everything to us. What will we do now...?"

"It will be all right, Moishe," Bruckman said. "I promise you, everything will be all right." He put his arm around Melnick for a moment to comfort him, and at the touch sensed the hot blood that pumped through the intricate network of the boy's veins, just under the skin, rich and warm and nourishing, waiting there inviolate for him to set it free.

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B. L. Keller ("Cold Debt," October 1982) returns with an offbeat tale about a cruise and a remarkable passenger, an exquisite and innocent young woman named Aurora Burke.

In One Ear

BY

B. L. KELLER

Now there," observed Dr. Mirmidion, standing on the bridge beside his captain, "is a sight you seldom see these days."

Captain Gates gazed down upon the monumental bosom of the boarding passenger. "Phenomenal," he allowed, whether in bawdry, nostalgia or awe it was impossible to tell.

To what lengths, he mused, might such heroically endowed women fall, were they to liberate themselves from the uplifting influence of the corsetiere.

"No, no," Mirmidion said, following his skipper's gaze. "The girl. The girl with her. Yankee, obviously. Still walks like a calf. But when have you last seen a young American so ravishing and so utterly demure? You'd swear we were seeing some matron aunt taking a favorite niece on the Grand Tour. Shades of Henry James."

"James," echoed the captain, envisioning that fabled outlaw ordering the girl out of the stagecoach, cocking his weapon....

"Why don't we invite them to sit at your table?" Shrewd, this Mirmidion. Knowing that Gates, jealous of his perquisites since the ship had been transferred to Formosan registry, would take first crack at any passenger of interest. Knowing, too, that the captain, with his morbid fear of shipwreck would spend most of his time on the bridge — scanning the Mediterranean for icebergs, the purser had put it — leaving the doctor to preside at table.

Gates sent to inquire about the ladies.

"Heloise Trebol," the first officer reported back, "and her niece, Aurora Burke."

"Are they anybody?"

"Must be, sir. Thirty pieces of Gucci luggage."

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Mrs. Trebol and her niece took their places at the captain's table shortly after noon.

Mrs. Gamble, vacationing from her husband, the distinguished arms merchant, leaned across Mirmidion to talk with the older woman. "And what does your husband do, Mrs. Trebol?"

"Very little. He is deceased."

"I'm so sorry. What was he in?"

"He was a proctologist."

"Ah. I've always been a firm believer. He may well have forseen his own end, then. Was he familiar with Edgar Cayce?"

The girl Aurora sat among them — entertainers recovering from face-lifts and television commercials, retired generals, the widowed and divorced who, having outlived or outlawed mates, were left with money and years to burn. She sat radiant, reminder and rebuke.

"Charming," Mirmidion pronounced.

"Charming," her tablemates agreed.

Later, Mrs. Trebol repaired to the main lounge, where the bridge players gathered and settled like sea-birds. In a corner, Aurora sat reading *The Little Prince* to three tots who'd been evicted from the nursery for lewd behavior.

"Delightful," Mrs. Gamble said.

There was no malice in her voice. Aurora's modesty, her cheerful acquiescence in her aunt's every wish, and the absence of pre-climacteral males among the passengers, left matrons serene in the assurance that the girl was enjoying nothing they had missed.

"An angel," her aunt affirmed.

Crackling from the lips of one of Aurora's little charges, who'd been jostled by a playmate, came an expletive so horrid that Romero, the young deck steward, rushed to remove the children from the lounge.

"It's all right, dear," Heloise assured her niece. "Why don't you go down to our suite and compose yourself. Try to forget you ever heard that word."

Outside the suite, Aurora was overtaken by Romero.

So he called himself.

Furtively conceived in an Azerbaijani caravansary, he'd made his way to sea at an early age, passing himself off as Neapolitan out of a fondness for multicolored ice creams.

On his first trip, he succumbed to one of the passengers, and learned that this was what some travelers and lines expected from cruise crews. Serving the stateroom set, he'd become jaded, coming to look upon new voyagers as a chore and a profitable short-term investment.

Yet there smoldered within him, perhaps because he was still young, a core of romanticism, kindled to volcanic pitch by the exquisite and artless Aurora Burke.

"You are going to your quarters?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, unfailingly courteous.

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"Let me fetch tea. You seem so distress— I will bring it to you there."

"How very kind." Touched and surprised by any little attention, she smiled with incandescent grace.

To save him the trouble of knocking with his hands full, she left the door of the suite open, and was brushing out her aunt's wiglet when he returned.

"How thoughtful." She smiled, turning great luminous eyes full on him.

With horror, he became aware of an inexorable rise of potency as he poured. "One lump or two?"

"I'll take it just the way it is."

Lounging against the door so that it shut as if by accident, he said, "I'm sorry the children so upset you."

"Poor waifs. They don't understand."

"They understand," he assured her somberly. "You should have hear the things they call me when I haul them out from the lounge."

"But, if we believe in the essential goodness of nature, we must believe in a primal innocence."

From under half-closed lids, he assessed her delicate ankles, the full young breasts so demure under the virginal cotton frock, her enchantingly expressive face.

She went on, quoting Rousseau, quoting Teilhard de Chardin.

In Romero's response to her was something darker and more complex than simple lust. It could not be explained by the novelty of his finding himself, for the first time in his seagoing career, the aggressor. It was as if her very naïveté roused in him the hot antique excitement of the courser.

But she spoke so sincerely, crediting him with the erudition of a Jesuit, that the romantic center in him was touched again. He saw her, not merely as prey, but as a woman of spirited intelligence, character, and sensitivity. He saw himself despoiling her with utmost tenderness, revealing his soul to her. He saw her stricken at parting from him, sending him impassioned letters, gold cuff links, American currency.

Yet he made no move to touch her.

Not through zeal or inventiveness alone had he pleased so many so profoundly. Romero was successful in his avocation because he was a subtle student of mood.

He sensed that Aurora recognized neither his promise nor his menace, that an advance at this point would be impolitic. But, being male, he flattered himself that she was drawn to him, else why permit him to linger in her suite?

Flattered himself.

She conversed with him so freely, in fact, and with no thought of reputation or rutting, because traveling with Heloise, she had absorbed, in all innocence, her aunt's assumption that those who wait on one are of no sex whatsoever.

So she stood talking Calvinism and Zen. Possessed of a natural civility, she

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treated all men as her equal, and never, never dreamed that the steward might see himself as such.

At last, the brevity of his responses made her suspect he was not paying attention to her words.

"But how thoughtless of me." She was remorseful. "I've been keeping you from your work."

He might yet have dared some indication of his feelings had he not heard the hearty baritone of Mrs. Trebol in the corridor.

Seizing the tea tray, he opened the door and slipped out, encountering Mrs. Trebol as she rounded the corner.

"Ah, tea," she rumbled. "Splendid idea. I'm sure my niece could do with something stimulating."

As the great ship clove the waters, the laboring of her innards inaudible to her passengers, Aurora waited on her aunt, busied herself with handiwork, lost graciously to her elders at shuffleboard, read discarded *Watchtower* magazines.

Romero, meanwhile, seethed in a compost of emotion. Aurora roused in him all the brutality of the hunter, along with that most sophisticated of aberrations, the desire to inflict awareness on the innocent.

At the same time, her goodness stirred in him something like that elevated fervor which Muslim, Christian, and Jewish liberators lavished for centuries upon Jerusalem.

He made it his business to be wherever he might find her alone. As Heloise, consumed by her own passion for conquest spent more and more time at the card table, Romero brought Aurora tea, trifles from the pantry, trapped her into longer, deeper conversations.

Glowing with excitement, laden with mememtos from museums and instructive shrines, Aurora returned from shore excursions at Barcelona, Marseilles, Naples.

"How sweet." Mrs. Gamble admired the celluloid cameos Aurora had brought back from Pompeii for her aunt's foursome, who remained on board rather than endure a dusty bus trip.

"They were on clearance," the girl confided. "I think because you can tell it's Mussolini's profile."

"What a dear," said Mrs. Ryan when Aurora had left.

"An angel," Heloise declared. "I remember the night that child was born. Her dear mother, my only sister, was in labor thirty hours when the doctor came to me. 'I'm not sure I can save them both,' he said. And I prayed. I tell you, I prayed. 'If it be thine will to take my sister and spare the child....' My God, Miss Figone, that was my ace!"

On deck, Romero leaned over Aurora. "Wonderful," he breathed.

"I love it," she murmured. "You only need a little more dexterity. Keep trying."

"Here on the poop deck? What if someone should come?"

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"Nobody ventures up here afternoons. It's much too hot. Just let me show you how once more. It's a very ancient skill, you know."

"I would never have believe you can do so much with only your hands."

"It even pre-dated needlepoint."

"And what do you call it, this string tying?"

"Macramé."

"Amaze. Could you show me how to make a shawl for my mother?"

"Romero, what a lovely thought."

"Tonight. But someplace where nobody sees us."

"But you mustn't be embarrassed. Manliness has nothing to do with what other people think."

"You don't care what people think?"

"Not a whit."

"And you like me?"

"Of course," she said warmly. afraid she'd seemed condescending when he was inept with the cord.

"But what about your aunt?"

"Well, she hasn't had the opportunity to get acquainted with you as I have, Romero, but I'm sure that if she did she would like you, too."

Hearing footsteps, he did not attempt to parse her sentence, only muttered urgently, "Tonight, midnight. Your place."

She found his hunger for her aunt's acceptance touching. "Romero, you know she plays bridge every night until long after midnight."

She was about to suggest a more appropriate time for him to call upon her aunt, perhaps whenever he might find himself in Chicago, but Dr. Mirmidion appeared on the poop deck and the youth sidled away.

"He's not been annoying you, I hope." The doctor offered her a mint.

"Oh, no. I was teaching him macramé."

"Macramé?"

"The art of knotting."

"How nihilistic you young people are. But you must be wary of Romero. He's a wild one."

"You misjudge him, Doctor."

It was the custom of those at the captain's table to linger over meals, so it was almost ten when Mirmidion invited Heloise and Aurora to join him for an after-dinner liqueur.

Aurora declined.

"She's promised to read *Prevention* to old Senator Brownton," Mrs. Trebol told the doctor, sipping a brandy Alexander.

"I hope she's not upset with me for warning her about that young steward," he said. "I know their friendship is innocent on her part, but he's notorious among us, you know. Terrible lady-killer. Totally unprincipled. Out to marry American and get himself a citizenship and a settlement."

"Steward? Friendship?"

"Surely you've noticed. He's with her every moment she's alone."

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"*Steward?*" Mrs. Trebol pressed a chill finger to her temple.

"Young Romero. Eurasian, I believe ... some exotic mix. Swarthy lad with quite a swagger about him."

Heloise rushed to her suite, searched lounges, decks, and finally found Aurora in the library, reading to Senator Brownton an article extolling the merits of soybeans.

Dropping the magazine, the girl leaped to her feet. "Aunt! Are you ill?"

"Migraine," Mrs. Trebol groaned.

Aurora assisted the stricken woman to their suite.

"What is this about you and a steward? That's what's prostrated me." Heloise collapsed on her bed, closing her eyes against the light. "Go fetch the doctor."

Aurora waited outside the suite while Mirmidion examined her aunt.

"I had no idea you were in the dark about that young dog Romero, Mrs. Trebol," he said. "I'd have cut my tongue out before upsetting you."

She groped for his hand. "That's what friends are for, Doctor. I hope you have something stronger than codeine."

He made her as comfortable as possible and, turning out the lights, left her resting under icepacks and Dolophine.

Aurora was waiting in the corridor. "What...."

"Shh." He took her to his office and gave her four pills in a small bottle. "You may give her one every six hours, no oftener."

"She's all right, isn't she?"

"She has a fearful migraine and is terribly, terribly disappointed."

"Disappointed? Doctor, I am appalled."

"So is your aunt."

"That you dare imply anything wrong between Romero and me is unfair, unkind, and undemocratic."

"I am a citizen of Monaco."

"No matter. You owe everyone concerned an apology."

"Apologize to that young stallion?"

"He has never, by the slightest word or gesture, even hinted at anything that would upset his own mother."

"Not his, perhaps. But consider your aunt."

"It happens that he cares very much about her opinion. Just this afternoon he asked me whether she liked him."

"My dear, that is not the issue. You seem to have no idea of what it is that worries those of us concerned for your welfare. Let me, as a physician, demonstrate. No, be still. Remember, I'm a doctor."

A few minutes before midnight, Romero pocketed his master key and slipped inside the Trebol suite. His own heartbeats fulminating in his ears, he stood in the dark, wondering whether to be standing or sitting when Aurora arrived.

"Is that you, love?" Mrs. Trebol, regretting her sharpness with Aurora, whispered softly from her bed of pain.

Romero did not pause for such sim-

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ple amenitities as removing his shoes.

"Oh, my God! Help! Anyone! HALOO! Help here!"

But cry out, struggle as he might, she clutched him mercilessly against that underwired bosom, while with one great fleshy knee she sought to unman him.

In the doctor's locked office, Aurora whispered, "I'm beginning to understand."

"You see why we older people worry?"

"Oh, yes."

"And that's only the beginning. Another area..."

"Heavens!" She wrenched from his grasp. "We must have hit something!"

For Captain Gates, preternaturally alert to disaster, had heard Romero's cries and ordered general quarters.

Her migraine quite forgotten, Mrs. Trebol took days and numerous Valiums to recover from her encounter with Romero.

"If she tells us once more about how he breathed like an animal, I'll jump ship," Miss Figone threatened. "Certainly before she gets to 'How could a beautiful boy like that be attracted to a woman my age?' "

"Look out," cautioned Mrs. Ryan. "Here she comes."

"Ah, the shape of the Sabine woman," muttered Mrs. Gamble.

By the following morning, the reckless Romero had compounded his transgressions.

"How desperate he must have been to attack his guard and jump overboard," Aurora worried, toying with her breakfast.

"Not when you consider we're in port," observed Mrs. Ryan.

But the girl went on, "I told you he had to be deranged, Aunt."

"Will you, for God's sake, stop snuffling into your scones and go ashore!" Heloise snarled.

"Are you sure you won't come?" Aurora asked.

"I told you, I don't believe I could stand the way they ogle American woman. I've been through enough."

"Then I'll stay aboard with you."

"Nonsense. Mrs. Ryan and Mrs. Gamble and Miss Figone are going. It will be a chance for me to rest. And Dr. Mirmidion is looking forward to showing all of you the sights."

Mrs. Gamble interceded. "You run along and find him, dear. Tell him we'll be ready in a few minutes."

"And be sure to take your bottle of salt tablets," Mrs. Trebol called after her niece. "I don't want you coming back with heat stroke."

"I still can't help feeling guilty," Aurora confessed to Dr. Mirmidion in the taxi.

"Nonsense," he assured her. "This way we can all enjoy ourselves."

"But it's the first time Mrs. Gamble and Mrs. Ryan and Miss Figone have been ashore. And just to send them off unescorted...."

"Be sensible. All of us would never fit comfortably in one cab — certainly

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not in this brutal heat."

"It is intense. I wonder if you'd mind moving over a bit."

"We have so much yet to experience, Aurora."

"I believe the desert is first on my itinerary."

That evening, in the sweltering private dining room of a café hidden deep in the maze of a suq, she said, "It may be all those hours I spent in your arms when you refused to rent yourself a separate camel, but I do wish you wouldn't hover over me so, Doctor. My menu is no more decipherable than yours."

"Aurora, have you forgotten that evening in my office?"

"Not at all. It was sobering to be brought ... face to face ... with drives I'd never truly appreciated. I learned enough so that I'll never be take unawares again."

"My angel...."

"Should we try a little couscous?"

"Trust me."

"If I didn't, would I ask you to recommend an entrée in a place like this?"

The groan that escaped him was so heartrending, she turned to him.

"Good heavens! You're all flushed! We must get you back to the ship. *Waiter!*" Fumbling with her purse, she took out a bottle from which she shook three tablets. "Here. Take these."

"What are you trying to do?" he cried, striking her hand from his lips. "What are those pills?"

"Stop struggling!" she commanded. "They're only salt."

The waiter, pushing aside the dusty curtains and seeing Mirmidion flailing at the girl, fled.

Thrusting Aurora from him, the doctor filled a tumbler with arrack from a carafe on the table.

"You know you're destroying your fluid balance." But, sensibly, she swallowed the tablets herself, for it had been a grueling day and the cubicle was stifling. "Why don't we step outside for a breath of air? I'd like to buy something for my aunt before the stalls close."

Swilling arrack, he rejected all her suggestions.

The waiter had run for help, but the café was in a neighborhood skirted by the law. At last, he staggered into a police outpost. There, his story of the beautiful young American being abused in a dining room was overheard by the redoubtable Abu Jassem Ler, known throughout the Mediterranean underworld as *Ibu Gawad*, who was about to change the shirt slashed from his body during his arrest of a trio of Burani nationalists.

Emerging from his office, massive torso gleaming bronze under fluorescent lights, Abu Jassem listened only a moment.

Aurora was trying to persuade the sodden Mirmidion to take coffee when the curtains of the cubicle were flung open. Kicking aside the doctor's chair,

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Abu Jassem reached over him to offer his hand to Aurora.

"Thank goodness," she murmured. "I was almost tempted to leave him alone in his condition." But when she tried to stand, she slipped to the floor.

"This woman," Abu Jassem Ler declared, "has been drugged."

Mirmidion struggled to his hands and knees. "Let us hope it is only cholera."

When she was able, Aurora did what she could on his behalf. "I will never believe he would attempt such a shameful thing," she protested. "Drugging people for no medical reason is a clear violation of the Hippocractic oath."

"Shh," Abu Jassem ordered gently. "Try to forget."

"How can I forget when he is languishing in a dungeon?"

"You must try." Brushing a soft, pale strand of hair back from her enchanting face, he recalled the madman Mirmidion's foul ravings. 'The devil's stirring stick,' that wretch had called this jewel, this flower.

She was embarrassed by the officer's solitude, but the massive solidity of his shoulder was reassuring, and she didn't want to hurt his feelings by drawing away.

"Inspector...."

"Abu Jassem."

"Abu Jassem, why have you held me as a witness for so long? And why are we driving so far into the desert?"

"Retracing his itinerary."

Later, in the shadow of an oasis, she whispered, "But he never brought me this far."

"I know. A man of no imagination whatsoever."

"We all realize it's been a terrible experience for you, Heloise." Mrs. Gamble shuffled the deck neatly. "But you can't put the child on a leash. She only went to thank the captain. She's in the best of hands."

"That's what you told me when you returned to the ship," Mrs. Trebol reminded her bitterly. " 'She's with Dr. Mirmidion. They must be aboard — the ship's doctor would hardly miss a sailing.' I searched deck after deck, alone. Finally, racked with migraine, I found she'd gone off with the wrong bottle, leaving me only salt tablets for my head. So I was forced to demand the doctor, alerting the whole damn crew to his absence, and hers."

"Be grateful your niece came through it unharmed," Mrs. Ryan soothed her.

"Unharmed? What of her reputation?"

"Mrs. Trebol, anyone who has observed her knows her natural goodness protected her. The man upstairs was looking after that girl," Miss Figone said.

"The man upstairs." Mrs. Ryan nodded.

"Well, Lord knows I've prayed enough. I remember the night she was born. I prayed to God, I prayed to

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anybody, and I have never been a religious person. 'If my sister must die to give life to this babe,' I said, 'so be it. All I ask is that the child grows up to be good and pure and innocent so that she never has to go through what her mother has.' "

Mrs. Ryan blew her nose in a cocktail napkin. "You've got a deal going with God."

"Does she ever ask about her mother?" Miss Figone inquired.

"Who?"

"Aurora," Miss Figone said. "Does she ever ask about her?"

"Who?"

Mrs. Trebol fixed Miss Figone with a gelid gaze. "What is there to ask?"

"I only mean, with the woman dying in childbirth...."

"Are you crazy? My sister is every bit as healthy as I am. That damn fool obstetrician's opinion wasn't worth two cents."

"At least your prayers weren't wasted," Mrs. Ryan said. "Aurora turned out just as you asked. Which proves somebody was listening."

"If you hadn't radioed our Embassy so promptly, and if they hadn't sent trackers to the oasis," Aurora told Captain Gates, "Abu Jassem Ler might still be holding me."

"That swine," Gates growled.

"Oh, no," she remonstrated gravely, "Just say he went far afield in his passion for justice. I hope he will be reinstated someday. I can't forgive myself for not realizing I'd taken the wrong bottle until I was returned to the ship and my aunt told me. You did radio our Embassy?"

"Immediately."

"Then poor Dr. Mirmidion will be returning to us?"

"He chose to give up the ship. But put him out of your mind, my dear."

"You take such incredible care of your passengers, Captain. But is it quite safe for just the two of us to be up here steering this great ship?"

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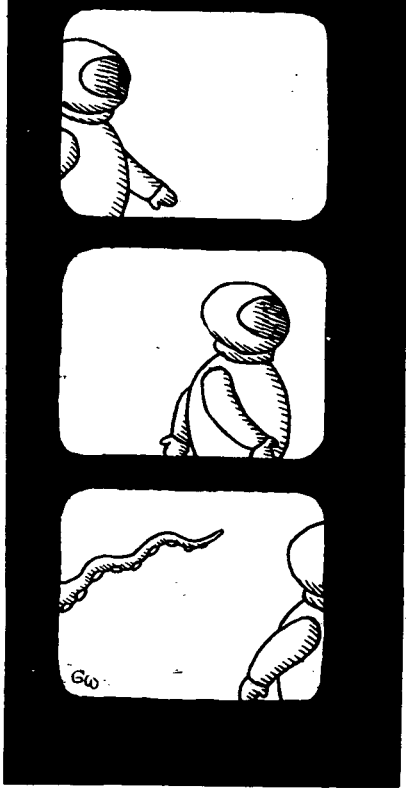
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE OTHER RING

There are certain works in those realms loosely covered by the word "cultural" that are so directly fantasy, in the strictest sense, that they certainly fall into the area covered by this column. I have in the past talked about television productions of the science fiction ballet, *The Cage*, and various film and TV productions of *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This month — the opera.

Until quite recently, the one and only example of heroic fantasy known to the general public — or all but the most knowledgeable of fantasy buffs, for that matter — was Wagner's *The Ring of the Nibelung*, an epic tetrology of operas (called, in the peculiar parlance of opera, a "cycle" — therefore, the "Ring Cycle.") Drawn from Teutonic mythology, they deal with those gods we think of as Norse (Odin, Loki, & Co.) in their Germanic incarnations (Wotan, Loge et al.), as well as giants, dragons, dwarfs, a magic ring, Valkyries, heros, a made-to-order magic sword, and incest — in other words, the sine qua nons of heroic fantasy. (There are also some peculiarly local manifestations, such as the Rhine Maidens, who are sort of transplanted Sirens — the Greek kind, not the ambulance kind, though in a bad production one might think differently.)

It's just possible that the Ring Cycle is what put heroic fantasy into a half century decline, because after it be-

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came established in the operatic repertoire at the end of the 19th century (and not without a struggle, since the Wagner operas were highly revolutionary for their time), the vision of the hero wielding a sword against a dragon and the goddess in a winged helmet astride a horse, also winged, became irresistably associated in the public mind with the opera version. Since the opera of the first part of this century was not particularly big on production values or lightsome singers, the picture inevitably degenerated into a humorous cliche of large ladies in brass breast plates bellowing at equally enormous gentlemen aimlessly waving swords about. It took Tolkien to lay that image forever.

The Ring (as it can be familiarly known to its devotees) was considered just too heavyweight for the mass viewing public, but it has been finally brought to the screen on PBS; as I write, only the first opera, *The Rhinegold* (which is sort of *The Hobbit* to *The Lord of the Rings* of the other three — i.e., an introduction) has been broadcast; the others will appear, in bits and pieces, one act here, another there, over the next few months. But the first is quite enough to chew on.

It opens in the Rhine — on the bottom, to be exact, and the Rhine's three daughters, the aforementioned Rhine maidens, are seductively teasing an unpleasant dwarf named Alberich. (It's never made quite clear whether he's operating with early snorkeling equipment or is magically amphibious.) They let drop that they have a lump of magic gold, the ownership of which will make some lucky person the Master of the Universe if he will renounce love. Seeing that he's getting nowhere with the sisters, Alberich steals the gold.

Switch to Valhalla, which has just been topped off; the builders are two giants who decide the builder's fee should include Freia, the goddess of youth. Since it is she who keeps the gods young with her magic apples, this doesn't go over very well with Wotan. He and Loge go down to the dwarf's realm and kidnap Alberich, who is ransomed with the Ring that has been fashioned out of the Rhinegold, along with lots of other loot.

The giants decide all this is more fun than Freia, who is understandably reluctant to be subjected to a fate worse than death at their oversize hands (or whatever), and whines a lot. Alberich lays a curse of death and dissension on the Ring, which immediately becomes operative since one of the giants kills the other over the hoard. Wotan has been extremely reluctant to give up the Ring, but is strongly advised by Erda, the Earth Goddess who appears out of nowhere to throw in her two pfennigs' worth, to lay off it.

The gods enter Valhalla across the rainbow bridge, Bifrost; Loge, who is, of course, fire and mischief and something of a barely tolerated outcast in the Valhalla set, draws the curtain,

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smiling at what he has set loose in the world (not the least of which is three more operas, which chronicle the disastrous career of the Ring through the lives of gods and heros, and brings on Gotterdammerung, otherwise known as Ragnarok, otherwise known as the twilight of the gods, otherwise known as the fourth opera in the Ring Cycle.)

One would have hoped, given the first mass media presentation of the Ring and the current public interest in heroic fantasy, that it might have been a production which presented the traditional elements, updated but not radically altered. But unfortunately, this one, done for the stage at Bayreuth, the Wagner holy-of-holies, was determinedly *non*-traditional; there was not a winged helmet in sight. The costumes and decore would have been called "experimental" twenty years ago; in current parlance they're just "let's-do-something-different." The male gods were got up in what looked like dressing gowns from the time of Frederick the Great, and Mrs. Fricka Wotan had the divinity of a Victorian housefrau, shawl and all. The opening in the river was more like the Rhine Valley Sewage Works, with catwalks, concrete buttresses, and lots and lots of steam, through which the Rhine daughters groped their way. Valhalla was about as romantic as an exterior wall of the Pentagon.

I liked the giants — they were indeed ten or eleven feet tall, by an idiotically simple device which it took me a while to figure out, and particularly while they were dragging Freia around, the eye really saw the traditional giant and maiden picture from all the fairy books.

But the finale — the entrance of the gods into Valhalla, for which Wagner wrote exactly the sort of glorious music that *should* accompany gods entering Valhalla — was the crowning disappointment. Not even a try at Bifrost (which admittedly needs a combination of Jim Henson and George Lucas to bring off), but just the gods in their bathrobes forming a *Seventh Seal* daisy chain and meandering into the wall.

If there's ever another Ring done for TV, I hope at least they'll bring back the brass breast plates.

(Thanks to comedienne Anna Russell, whose send up of the Ring is still the funniest of all heroic fantasy satires, for at least one of the jokes in this piece.)

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Fred Singer tells us that he is 39 and teaches history at Hanau High School, a school for children of military personnel stationed in Germany. He has sold stories to Amazing, Asimov's *and others. His first F&SF story concerns a most ordinary man and his attempt to relive one remarkable day.*

A Single Yesterday

BY

FRED SINGER

I'd trade all my tomorrows for a single yesterday. — Kris Kristofferson

Harry Klein awoke on instinct as the subway train rolled into the Thirty-fourth Street station. He had been dreaming again about Rachell and that day.

He stepped tiredly through the parting doors along with the rush-hour crowd and walked across the dirty platform to the waiting local. The routine was familiar. He had been doing it for twenty-three years.

Harry took a seat in the corner and stared sullenly at the other passengers. A bunch of *swartzes,* he thought. There's hardly a white person left these days.

A college kid with hair down to his *pupic* was reading a book. Harry shook his head. The world had really taken a turn for the worse; not that he even cared about the world. It had been rotten to him right from the start. It had made him short and bald. He did not want to be short and bald, but the powers that be had made him that way.

Harry Klein hated the train. It was a dirty mess with graffiti all over the place. It's those damned kids and their spray cans. No respect for property, no respect for anything. Kids, *swartzes,* hippies, Viet Nam; the world had really gone mad.

Harry left the train at Twenty-fifth Street and headed automatically up the stairs to the street. He could have walked it blindfolded, could have found his way to the unemployment office on radar. Harry knew every crack in the sidewalk, every sewer, every building, every shop.

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The temperature must have been below twenty on this December 24. The air was wet and a moderate wind blew. Harry hated New York weather. It was just terrible, cold in winter and sweltering in summer. And noisy, all the time noisy. It could drive a man crazy. On top of all that the city stunk from all those cars.

Harry Klein hated New York.

Well, at least it was Christmas Eve. The holiday atmosphere always tended to lift his spirits. He had a four-day weekend to look forward to, including Christmas Day with his sister and her family.

In spite of his general irritability, he was able to put up a credibly friendly facade, even for those clucks in the office. He even had a special personality for the young secretaries who came and went over the years. He knew they would never take him seriously, but it was nice to talk to them.

Rachell.

Thoughts of her often impinged on his consciousness without warning.

" 'Morning, Harry," Wilson the Black Guy greeted. "Merry Christmas."

"Hi, Wilson. Merry Christmas to you, too."

Harry shook off his coat and hung it on the rack. Waves of cold drifted from it. He absently noted a Christmas wreath hanging on the wall.

"Nu?" was the greeting from Cohen the Bureaucrat at the next desk. He was about the same age as Harry but had a full head of gray hair and a nice family at home.

"Merry Christmas, Marvin," Harry said, trying to sound cheerful.

"Merry Christmas, he says," said Cohen the Bureaucrat. "Here we are, a couple of old Jews saying Merry Christmas. I ask you."

Harry couldn't stand Cohen. He was always so smug. "Okay, Cohen, for you I say Happy Hanukkah, and when we are all on vacation tomorrow you can come and say Happy Hanukkah to the walls."

Harry scurried over to the coffee pot, where he found Mrs. Carbonari spooning sugar into her paper cup. "Good morning, Mrs. Carbonari. It's a cold morning, isn't it?"

The old bird was condescending, as usual. She was an executive of sorts, Mrs. Carbonari was, and she found it hard to tolerate worms like Harry Klein. "Yes, it is cold, Mr. Klein. By the way, I have to remind you that the photocopy machine is not to be used for forms 16-20. I thought you understood that."

"Sorry, I forgot." You ugly old bat, I hate you, too.

Things were slow at the office that morning. The usual Wednesday lineup were waiting to sign for their unemployment checks. Harry interviewed four new cases. Sometimes he felt good about his work. After all, it was a *people* job; always new and interesting people to talk to; Viet Nam vets back from the war, young girls out of work.

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Unfortunately, most of his clients were Puerto Ricans and *swartzes.* During the lull he sat at his desk trying to look busy.

On the Wednesday line was a girl who didn't quite fit. She looked too nice to be unemployed, but mainly she looked like Rachell; the same honey hair and green eyes. She looked old-fashioned, that was it, that's what struck Harry. She looked like she had just stepped out of 1948. A lovely girl, yes, lovely.

"Nu?" said Cohen the Bureaucrat. "A girl like that, Harry, could be your daughter."

"What are you talking about, Cohen? What girl?"

"Maybe you weren't, uh, admiring the young lady over there in the blue skirt."

"Don't be foolish, Cohen, I'm too old" (and short and bald) "for one like her."

"But you can dream." Cohen was smiling.

"Listen to me, Cohen." (You son of a bitch who's always badgering me.) "In my time I've had girls like that, I can tell you, so don't be such a wise guy."

Cohen the Bureaucrat shrugged and grimaced as if to say, "So whattaya want from me?" and turned to some papers on his desk.

The office closed at one and the afternoon was devoted to a Christmas party complete with wine and snacks. Harry's stomach grew tight. After the party he would take the subway home to spend another Christmas Eve alone. Thank God for television, it made life almost bearable. He would spend the night with Bob Hope and his guests.

Harry enjoyed the party. He and Marvin Cohen compared notes on their mutual dislike of that Carbonari witch. One of the young secretaries (couldn't be more than twenty-three if she's a day) talked with him about skiing. He tried to keep the conversation going, but had nothing more to offer than, "Yes, yes, that's very interesting, sounds like fun," and so on. She drifted away to chat with a young black man who was getting drunk. (Naturally.)

Harry was one of the last to leave. He walked to the subway in a heavy snowfall, jammed his way into the train, and fought his way to a seat. Ignoring the herd of sardines that towered above him, he allowed the rumbling train to lull him into dreams of Rachell.

Actually, they weren't dreams, just thoughts. He went over the day again; how the sun shined, how she looked, his winning the chess championship from that smug bastard Marcus, their fumbling but successful attempts at making love, the little restaurant along the river....

It wasn't just any day, it was The Day. The day when he was twenty-two and on the threshold of life. The day when everyone smiled and the weather was flawless. It was a time

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when he felt that God might even exist; a God that walked with him and cared for him. It was a day of hope, joy, love, warmth, promise, and potential. It mesmerized him, beckoned him, and massaged his ego. True enough, all the potential fizzled, the dreams deteriorated, and even Rachell, lovely Rachell, left him for Marcus the following year. Nevertheless, the day stood alone, an entity separate from time, an oasis in a parched and worthless life.

Some men crave to live their lives over, to do it again or to change the past. Harry had no such desire. He couldn't change his past. He was a loser and he knew it. No, he didn't want a second chance, but if he could only relive that day, and feel what he felt and walk again with Rachell....

The train wasn't moving. There had been no sudden lurch, no squealing of brakes, no momentum pushing him forward; simply an abrupt absence of movement.

Harry lifted his head. The train was already uptown, elevated above the street, and the crowd had thinned. The rest of the people in the car (plenty of Puerto Ricans, you can be sure) sat stone still like statues. He went to the window. Snowflakes hung suspended in the air, people caught in the act of walking remained in fixed positions. Nothing moved. There were no sounds.

A newspaper rustled.

Harry spun around to see a heavy-jowled man wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a heavy coat, and brimmed hat casually leafing through the newspaper.

"Mista, mista," Harry said in a shaky voice. "Look what happened to the people."

Jowel-face looked up annoyed. "I know, I know, whaddaya botherin' me for. I'm tryin' ta read da paper." His voice was sing-songy and rose at the end of each sentence.

"But what happened? My God...."

"Pipe down, willya, Klein, for cryin' out loud."

"But look...."

Jowl-face shook his head. " 'Look,' he says, 'look.' I don't havta look, I'm the one who did it. Now let me read in peace."

"But what's going on? What happened to everyone?"

The man tossed aside the paper and sighed. "I guess I can forget about reading. Sit down, Klein, you're making me nervous. You know what I mean?"

Klein sat.

"The name's Goldberg."

"How do you do, Mr. Goldberg."

" 'How do I do, Mr. Goldberg!' " Mr. Goldberg exclaimed, throwing up his arms and rolling his eyes at the overstuffed black woman sitting motionless next to him. "Is that all he can say?" Then to Harry: "Look here, Klein, I go and stop time, get all those little snowflakes just sitting there — which is no easy task, I assure you — and all you can do is mutter, 'How do

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you do, Mr. Goldberg.'

"Listen, Klein, have I got a deal for you, such a deal like you've never seen before. Believe me, you can't pass it up. You interested?"

All Harry could manage was a gulp.

"Don't be scared, Klein, I'm a friend. I can give you back that day."

Harry stared at him. "Whaddaya mean?"

Goldberg looked to the ceiling and rolled his eyes. " 'What do I mean,' he says. The *day*, Klein, the day you like so much. With *Rachell*," he spoke deliberately. "And the *chess* tournament. Are you with me, Klein, or would you like maybe I draw you a picture?"

"I — I'm with you."

"Good, now listen. It's Christmas and I like maybe to do some poor *schnook* a favor, and you're that *schnook*. You want to go back and relive that day? O.K., Klein, I give it to you."

Harry was dumbfounded but managed to find his voice. "Why?"

"Why what? Speak up, Klein, I haven't got all night."

"Why are you doing this?"

"It's my hobby. Some people collect stamps, some paint; me, I let people go back in time and laugh myself silly at the results."

Harry stared at him, wide-eyed and incredulous.

"Let me tell you, it's an interesting hobby. I knew one guy, wanted to meet his grandparents while they were young, so I sent him back, and what do you know, he accidently trampled his grandfather with a horse and the guy disappeared. He never existed. I swear, I split my sides laughing. You understand, Klein, it's a hobby."

Harry's mind began to clear. "Are you Jewish?" he asked.

"Do I look Jewish, do I talk Jewish? *Nu?*"

"But are you?"

Goldberg grimaced by moving his mouth into his cheek. "Look here, Klein, I'm trying to make a deal. If I'm talking to a *swartza*, I look like a *swartza*. If I'm dealing with a housewife, I look like a housewife. You understand, it's just smart business. I'm here to make a deal, you want it or not?"

"You're not the ...?"

"Klein!" Goldberg exclaimed, looking insulted. "I should say not. What a terrible thing to think about a fine person such as myself."

"Then what do you want from me? Nobody makes a deal for nothing."

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere. The customer is asking questions. He must be interested.

"What I want from you, Klein, is permission to watch. You go back to your day, I watch."

"That's all? You don't want my soul or anything?"

"Klein, I hate to be insulting, but your soul is not exactly a high-quality product. Now stop being stupid. I don't want souls. Sending people back

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is my hobby. I watch. Do we have a deal?"

"I guess."

"Then let's shake on it." Goldberg offered his hand, Harry shook it, and awoke in his room in The Bronx in 1948.

The sun sliced through the venetian blinds, leaving a gleaming grid of white on the flowered wallpaper. Harry jumped out of bed and rolled up the blinds. It looked like a glorious day. The sky was a deep, rich, cloudless blue and the sun was warm.

While he shaved and dressed, Harry's head was full of thoughts of Rachell. His star was definitely rising. Everything lately had been positive and encouraging. His sister was engaged, which meant that the *kibitzer* would soon be out of the house. His mother's health had drastically improved. He felt more pride and confidence than ever before.

Then he remembered. His mother would die, the job would fizzle out, and Rachell would....

But, no matter. It was his day, the one he longed for, his to enjoy, and he got it for free. Goldberg with his big mouth, he was the *schmuck*. Let him watch. Harry got the better of the deal.

He whistled his way into the kitchen. There was his mother ... alive. A year later the cancer will have eaten her away. The letter would be waiting.

"Harry, you got a letter."

"I wonder who it could be from," Harry replied mischievously.

"You're certainly in a good mood today," his mother observed from the sink.

Harry tossed the letter aside and grinned. There was no hurry. He wanted to savor every moment.

While downing a hearty breakfast he leafed through the newspaper. DiMaggio had gone three for four in yesterday's game. Good old Joltin' Joe. Baseball had not been the same since the Yankee clipper hung up his cleats. Many a day Harry had sat in the Stadium bleachers watching DiMaggio leap for those high ones in center field.

Another article dealt with that Negro rookie, Jackie Robinson. Every day there were articles about Robinson, the first Negro to play big-league ball. Harry shook his head and turned to the front page.

Ah! There was Harry Truman gearing up for the election. Now there was a man. Like baseball players, they just don't make them like they used to. Carter, Ford, Nixon. The whole lot of them couldn't hold a candle to the man from Missouri.

After his second cup of coffee Harry opened the letter and read that he had done well on the civil service exam and would soon be placed in a government job. The news did not elate him as it had the first time, because now he knew what government service really meant. Originally he had fantasized about working for Governor Dewey

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and moving on to the White House with him as an aide. Some White House; twenty-three years at the unemployment office.

Harry pushed these unpleasant thoughts to the back of his mind, kissed his mother good-bye, and virtually danced out of the house.

The neighborhood looked fresh and clean. No cars glutted the street, homes were neat, lawns were tidy. Children played in the early-morning sunshine. When Harry sold the house in the late sixties the neighborhood had been overrun by *swartzes*.

First stop was Charlie Martin's to borrow his new Buick. Seeing Charlie again was somewhat mind-boggling. Charlie was one of the few people who ever treated Harry with friendship and respect. He would be blown to bits in Korea.

Harry pumped his hand. "Charlie, it's so good to see you again."

Charlie laughed. "Wow, what's gotten into you today?"

"I guess I'm just in a good mood."

"Hey," Charlie said, changing the subject. "Why don't you come inside and take a look at the new television."

Harry had forgotten about that. The first time around he had been quite excited. He planned to buy one himself as soon as he became established in his government job and the money was rolling in. This time, however, television was something less than a novelty.

"Maybe some other time, Charlie. I'm anxious to get over to the clubhouse for the tournament."

"That's right!" Charlie beamed. "You play Marcus in the finals today. Think you can beat him?"

Harry could not suppress a broad smile. "I already have."

The next stop was Clark's candy store. Harry plunked down a dime and ordered a creamy chocolate malted. He must have had hundreds of malteds at Clark's over the years. It was so comforting to be back.

In the late fifties, after Mr. Clark died, the place was torn down and replaced with a bank. No one in the world made malteds like Mr. Clark. Harry had himself a second malted, then a third. What a rare opportunity. Neither the man nor the place existed anymore.

Harry got an idea. "Say, Mr. Clark, what do you put in these malteds, anyway?" Life would be a lot nicer in 1977 if he could have Clark's malteds.

"You plannin' ta give me competition?" Mr. Clark said in complete seriousness.

"I just love your malteds and I was wondering if...."

"And maybe that crook Webster across the street gave you a few bucks to spy on me, huh?"

"Are you crazy, Mr. Clark, all I want is to...."

"You tell Webster there's no way on this God's Earth he's gonna run me out of business with that crap shop of his."

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Old man Clark continued to mutter. Harry didn't remember that at all. The man was paranoid. This wasn't part of the day, but then Harry hadn't asked for the recipe the first time around. He finished off the third malted and made a hasty exit. Behind him old man Clark was saying, "Think I was born yesterday, do ya? No one drinks three malteds unless he's spyin'."

Harry arrived at the South Bronx Chess Club a half hour before the match. Already spectators were congregating. The three malteds (three creamy glasses in each) sat rather heavily in his stomach.

Harry was nauseated when the match began. He looked across the board at Marcus. Beating the smug, arrogant man had been one of the day's great pleasures. Marcus was handsome, athletic, condescending, and two years older than Harry. He was a master of innuendo and never passed up an opportunity to subtly dig at those he considered unworthy.

Harry had many reasons to hate Marcus, not the least of which was the fact that Marcus would steal Rachell from him. She was the only girl who ever loved him, and Harry would eternally hate the smug bastard who now sat across the board from him. He would take out his revenge by beating Marcus just as he had done the first time. Only now victory would be so much sweeter.

Harry glared at Marcus. "Are you prepared to lose?"

Marcus responded with a surprised, arrogant half-smile. "Lose? I hardly expect to lose to *you*." He seemed amused by the little man's uncharacteristic confidence.

"You *will* lose. I guarantee it. And I'll bet a hundred dollars on it. Are you afraid, Marcus?" He spat the man's name with venom.

Marcus was shaken by Harry's aggressiveness, but he couldn't back down in front of the room full of spectators. "Afraid, little man? Hardly. I intend to thrash you in this contest. The pleasure of taking your money and beating you will make my day complete."

His comment was frighteningly ironic.

Harry's nausea intensified.

The first four moves were traditional. Harry did not remember many details of the game, although it had been close. Marcus crept his knight out to the left. Harry stared at it. Why three malteds? Oh God, don't let me throw up. That knight, that knight, what did he do with that knight?

A slow, creeping panic crept over Harry. His face flushed and perspiration soaked him. He hadn't played tournament chess in more than twenty years. He was out of practice. How could he expect to win a championship?

Impulsively, he slashed his bishop across the board in an attacking gesture. Marcus raised his eyebrows. It

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was going to be easier than he thought.

Four moves later Harry's bishop was gone and his queen was being stalked. The nausea was unbearable and he couldn't concentrate.

Harry excused himself, went to the bathroom, and threw up three creamy chocolate malteds and a hearty breakfast. "I can't play, I'm sick," he whined to the official of the game.

"You're sick because you can't play," Marcus said, smiling crookedly.

"I can beat you," Harry gasped. "I *did* beat you."

The other club members exchanged glances.

"Sit down and finish the game," Marcus urged. "It won't take long."

"I can't," Harry murmured.

"I'll expect your check in the mail by the end of the week," Marcus said. "How you got into the championship game I'll never know."

Harry stumbled out of the South Bronx Chess Club humiliated and enraged. But he *had* won, he *had!* This all wrong. He leaned against the Buick, perspiring under the hot sun. "Goldberg! Goldberg, you're cheating me! GOLDBERG!"

"You want something, maybe?"

"You?!"

"You were expecting maybe the Queen of Sheeba?"

"You're cheating me. This isn't the way it was."

"Who told you to drink three malteds? That rich stuff, it's no good for you."

"But I won, I won!"

Goldberg shrugged. "Look, you win some, you lose some. Go to your girl friend, she'll cheer you up, maybe."

Harry began to say something, but Goldberg was gone.

He arrived at Rachell's house an hour early. A strange girl came to the door. "You're early," she admonished.

He stared stupidly at her. She wasn't nearly as pretty as he remembered her. As a matter of fact, she was rather plain.

"Rachell?" he asked tentatively.

"Are you feeling all right, Harry?"

He explained about the nausea and the lost match. She sympathized and gave him a hug. His spirits soared. Things were going to work out after all: driving up the Hudson, the little seafood place along the river, making love at twilight....

Harry drove across the George Washington Bridge and up the Hudson. The sun was still high and warm in the late afternoon. He continued to give sidelong, quizzical glances at Rachell.

"Harry, why are you looking at me so funny?"

"What? What's funny?"

Rachell grimaced. "You. You seem different. I don't know, it's like you were," she hesitated searching for the right word. "Like you were older."

"Older, ha, ha, who me? I'm still the same old happy-go-lucky Harry Klein."

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She grimaced again and wiggled her nose, a trait he remembered. Then she looked out the window, deep in thought.

When they reached the deserted side road along the river, Rachell was supposed to suggest they take a walk, but this time she was preoccupied, so Harry took the initiative. As they strolled toward the place where they would make love, Harry's blood began to rumble. She was looking better and better to him. Everything was the same: her honey-colored hair (well,, a little on the brown side), the blue dress, the trees, the river, the very air they breathed. They would talk, confess their love, caress and awkwardly make love as the sun dipped into the trees behind them and friendly twilight shadows covered them softly.

It didn't work out that way.

Harry forced talk of love prematurely and out of context as a prelude to unbuttoning her blouse.

"Harry, what are you doing?"

"Don't you want to? I thought we loved each other."

"It doesn't seem right."

Harry didn't remember this part at all. "Rachell, honey, believe me, it's O.K."

"What's gotten into you, Harry? You've never acted this way before."

Harry exploded. "What's going on here? This isn't the way it was. What's wrong with you?"

"You're asking what's wrong with me. You're the one who's acting strange, like the way you keep looking at me. Now let's stop all this nonsense and go to the restaurant. I'm starved."

Depression set in as they sat waiting for the food to be served. Everything was the same — the waiter, the menu, the young couple at the next table — but the creeping horror of the loss of the day overwhelmed him.

The food was excellent, but the waiter overcharged them a dollar. The first time around Harry was young and in love and didn't notice the mistake, but his cynical fifty-two-year-old mind angrily called the waiter a cheat. It soured their mood even further.

Rachell was silent most of the way home. The final moonlit walk was dispensed with as both were in bad moods. When he left her at the door she was wondering what she ever saw in him. There are other men in the world, she thought, like that cute guy, Marcus, that Harry plays chess with.

Harry was in a frenzy. He drove to a dark side street and slumped over the wheel, sobbing. His teeth ground together so fiercely that his jaw hurt, and the knuckles that clenched the steering wheel turned white.

"Goldberg!" he screamed. "Goldberg you son-of-a-bitch, what have you done?"

Goldberg appeared in the seat next to him. "All right already, you're waking up half of eternity with that screaming."

Harry was livid. "What have you done, what have you done?"

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"You know, Klein, you have a funny habit of repeating yourself."

He looked at him in wide-eyed frustration. His lower lip shook uncontrollably. "It was my day, my day."

"That's right, Klein, it is your day. You still have until tomorrow, you know."

Harry felt a terrible pressure behind his eyes. He grabbed Goldberg by the collar. "You cheated me, this wasn't the way it happened."

"Look here, Klein, get a hold on yourself. So you had a few problems. Don't worry about it; didn't cost a dime. It was free."

"Goldberg, she really did love me, she really did. And I won, Goldberg. I was the chess champ of the South Bronx Club. You do believe me, don't you?"

"Of course I believe you, Klein. You had a little bad luck, that's all."

Harry sighed deeply and sank back into the shadows. "Get me out of here. Send me home."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Good-bye, Klein."

The train rumbled along into the next station. Snow was falling heavily. Perspiration soaked Harry Klein.

His first thought was that he had been dreaming, but he knew it had been real, a living nightmare. Walking home against the wind-driven snow, he knew with frightening clarity that the one warm memory of his life was gone. The two days were confused in his mind. He couldn't distinguish between the original and the return, but, of course, both were the original — or did the second cancel the first?

Now his life was completely empty.

He forced his mind away from the horror, grabbed some cold chicken from the refrigerator, and turned on the Bob Hope Christmas Special.

Goldberg's face appeared on the screen in living color. "Surprise!" said Goldberg's grinning face.

"Leave me alone," Harry whined.

"You know, Klein, I'm feeling a little sorry about your misfortune. I think maybe I can do something for you."

Harry backed away from the television set. Goldberg's face became distorted. "Go away."

"We can make another deal, Mr. Klein." His voice was crisp and clear. I can send you back again to your day, only this time everything will go as planned. It will be perfect — even better than perfect, a glorious day filled with love and victory. I can do that for you, Mr. Klein."

Harry cringed against the living room wall. His voice quivered a simple, "Why?"

Goldberg's eyes narrowed and his sneering smile revealed razor-sharp teeth. "I think you know."

Harry made a move to turn off the television, but hesitated. Goldberg's offer was at least worth considering.

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A. Bertram Chandler, an Australian writer and former naval officer, has been writing stories about the Rim Worlds and featuring the well known character John Grimes, for at least thirty years. Here is a real treat, a new story in which Commodore Grimes recounts his adventures with the odd Gods of a planet called Stagatha.

Grimes and the Odd Gods

BY

A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Faraway Quest, the Rim Worlds Confederacy survey ship, was still berthed at Port Fortinbras, on Elsinore. She was still awaiting replacements for the rotors of her outmoded inertial drive unit. More than once, in strongly worded Carlottigrams, Commodore Grimes had requested, demanded almost, that he be allowed to put the repairs in the hands of one of the several local shipyards. Each time he received a terse reply from the Rim Worlds Admiralty's Bureau of Engineering which, translated from Officialese to English, boiled down to *Father knows best.* He unburdened his soul to the Rim Worlds ambassador on Elsinore.

"Can't *you* do something, Your Excellency?" he asked. "There's my ship been sitting here for weeks now. My crew's becoming more and more demoralized...."

"As well I know, Commodore," the ambassador agreed. "You've some hearty drinkers aboard your vessel, and when they drink they brawl. Perhaps you could stop the shore leave of the worst offenders...."

"And have them drinking and brawling aboard the *Quest?* Or, if I really put my foot down, slouching around in a state of sullen sobriety? There's only one thing to do. Get them off this bloody planet and back where they belong, back to their wives and families or, in the case of the tabbies, to their boyfriends."

"Some of your female personnel are even greater nuisances than the men," said the ambassador.

"You're telling *me.* But as an ambassador, Your Excellency, you pile on far mores Gs than a mere commodore, a commodore on the reserve list at that. Can't *you* do something?"

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"I've tried, Grimes. I've tried. But it's all a matter of economics. The Confederacy just does not have the funds in any bank in the Shakespearean Sector to pay for a major repair and replacement job. Those rotors will have to be manufactured on Lorn, and then carried out here in whatever ship of the Rim Runners fleet is due to make a scheduled call to Elsinore...."

"And meanwhile," the commodore said, "there are mounting port dues. And the wages that everybody aboard *Faraway Quest* is getting for doing nothing. And the three square meals a day, plus snacks, that all hands expect as their right. And...."

"I'm a diplomat, Grimes, not an economist."

"And I'm just a spaceman. Oh, well. Theirs not to reason why, and all that. And now I'll be getting back to my ship, Your Excellency."

"What's the hurry, Commodore? I was hoping that you would stay for a few drinks and, possibly, dinner."

"I have an appointment," said Grimes.

The ambassador laughed. "Another interview for Kitty's Korner? I always watch that program myself. And I've heard that Station Yorick's ratings have improved enormously since Miss Kelly persuaded you to treat her viewers and listeners to your never-ending series of tall tales."

"Not so tall," growled Grimes.

"Perhaps not. You have had an interesting life, haven't you?"

An hour or so later, in his sitting room aboard the old ship, Grimes and Kitty Kelly were enjoying the simple yet satisfying meal that had been brought to them by one of the stewardesses. There were sandwiches constructed from crisply crusty new bread, straight from *Faraway Quest's* own bakery, and thick slices of juicy Waldegren ham, the flavor of which derived from the smoldering sugar pine sawdust over which the meat had been smoked. (Almost alone among the ship's personnel, Grimes liked this delicacy; that was a good supply of it in the ship's cool stores. He was pleased that Kitty, hitherto inclined to be an unadventurous eater, enjoyed it, too.) There was a variety of cheeses — Ultimo Blue, Aquarian Sea Cream, and Caribbean Pineapple and Pepper — altogether with assorted pickles and the especially hot radishes that Grimes had insisted be cultivated in the ship's hydroponic farm. There was Australian beer — some while ago Grimes had done a private deal with the master of a Federation star tramp not long out from Earth — served in condensation-bedewed pewter pots.

Nibbling a last radish with her strong while teeth, Kitty slumped back in her chair. Grimes regarded her appreciatively. As she always did, she was wearing green, this time a long, filmy, flowing dress with long, loose sleeves. Above it, the food and the drink had brought a slight flush to the normal creamy pallor of her face, a

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healthy pallor, set off by the wide scarlet slash of her lips. Below her black glossy hair, this evening braided into a sort of coronet, her startlingly blue eyes looked back at Grimes.

She murmured, "Thank you for the meal, Commodore. It was very good."

He asked, "And will you sing for your supper?"

She said, "You're the one who's going to do the singing." She looked at the bulkhead clock. "It's almost time that we got the show on the road again. And what are you going to talk about tonight? Your adventures as a pirate?"

"Not a pirate," he corrected her stiffly. "A privateer."

"Who knows the difference? And who cares? Or what about when you were governor general of that anarchist planet?"

"Too long a story, Kitty," he said. "And too complicated. By All the Odd Gods of the Galaxy, there never were, before or since, such complications!"

She said thoughtfully, "That ... that oath you often use ... By All the Odd Gods of the Galaxy ... Did you ever get tangled with any of these Odd Gods?"

He told her, "I'm an agnostic. But ... there have been experiences."

She got up from her chair, went to the case containing her audio-visual recorder, opened it, pulled out the extensions with their lenses and microphones.

She said, peering into the monitor screen. "Yes, that's it. Pipe in one hand, tankard in the other ... And now, *talk*."

"What about?"

"The Odd Gods, of course. Or, at the very least, One Odd God."

He said, "Oh, all right. But I must get my pipe going first."

As you know (he started at last), I left the Federation Survey Service under something of a cloud after the *Discovery* mutiny. For a while I was yachtmaster to the Baroness Michelle d'Estang, an El Doradan aristocrat, and on the termination of this employment she gave me the yacht's pinnance, which was practically a deep-space ship in miniature, as a parting gift. I called her — the pinnance, not the baroness — *Little Sister* and set up shop as Far Traveler Courier Services. I'd carry anything or anybody anywhere, as long as I got paid. There would be small parcels of special cargo. There would be people waiting to get to planets well off the normal interstellar trade routes.

It was a living.

I didn't make a fortune, but there was usually enough in the bank to pay ports dues and such and to keep me in life's little luxuries. It was lonely for quite a lot of the time but, now and again, there were passengers who were pleasant enough company ... Yes, female ones sometimes, if you must know. But it was the female ones who

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usually got me into all kinds of trouble. Mphm.

Well, I'd carried a small parcel of urgently needed medical supplies to a world called Warrenhome — no, the inhabitants weren't descended from rabbits but the name of the captain who made the first landing was Warren — where they were having some sort of plague. A mutated virus. After I'd made delivery and received the balance of the payment due to me, I lost no time in placing the usual advertisements in the usual media. I decided that I'd wait around for a week and then, if nothing came up, get off the planet. There was talk that that virus, a nasty one, might mutate again.

Luckily (I thought at the time) I didn't have long to wait for my next job. I returned to *Little Sister*, after a yarn with the Port Captain, just before my usual lunchtime. I saw that a tall woman was approaching the airlock door from the opposite direction to myself. She was dressed in severe, ankle-length black with touches of white at throat and wrists. On her head was an odd sort of hat, black, with a wide, stiff brim. The skin of her strong-featured face was white; even the lips of her wide mouth were pale. Her eyes were a hard, steely blue.

She stated rather than asked, "Captain Grimes."

Her voice was deep for a woman, resonant.

I said, "I have that honor, Miz...?"

She said, "You may call me Madame Bishop."

I asked, "And what can I do for you, Miz Bishop?"

She said coldly, "Bishop is my title, Captain Grimes, not my surname. I understand that you are seeking employment for yourself and your ship. I shall employ you."

I let us both into the ship, seated her at the table in the cabin while I went through into the little galley. I asked her what she would like to drink. She told me coldly that she would appreciate a glass of water. I brought her one, and a pink gin for myself. She looked at this disapprovingly. I pulled out my pipe and filled it. She as good as ordered me to put it away. It wasn't so much the words that she used but the way in which she said them. But I had been learning, ever since I set up in business for myself, that the customer is always right. I put my pipe back in my pocket.

She asked, "How soon can you lift ship, Captain Grimes?"

I said, "As soon as I've paid my bills and cleared outwards."

"Today?"

"Yes."

She asked, "Are you capable of making the voyage to Stagatha?"

I'd never heard of that world, but *Little Sister* was capable of going just about anywhere in the galaxy. I told her yes.

"What will be the single fare for one passenger?"

I couldn't answer this at once. I didn't know where Stagatha was or

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how far it was from Warrenhome. I asked her to wait while I switched on the playmaster. She told me that she did not approve of frivolous entertainment. I told her that the playmaster screen served as the read-out for *Little Sister's* computer and library bank. I don't think she believed me until the requested data began to appear.

In a short while I had all the information required. The voyage would take six weeks. Then there were all the various expenses accruing over this period — depreciation, insurance, consumption of stores, the salary that I — as owner — was paying to myself as master. And so on, and so on. After all, I had to show a profit. I told her how much I should be asking.

She said, "We are not a rich church, Captain Grimes, but we are not a poor one. And has it not been written that the laborer is worthy of his hire?" She allowed herself the merest hint of a smile. "Too, you are the only laborer available at this moment of time."

"Is this voyage a matter of some urgency?" I asked.

"The Lord's work is always urgent," she told me.

And so it was that I contracted to carry Bishop Agatha Lewis, of the Church Of The Only Salvation, from Warrenhome to Stagatha.

He paused, looking down into his now-empty tankard. Kitty refilled it for him, refilled her own.

She said, "So far we haven't had any Odd Gods. These Only Salvation people seem to have been just another nut cult, probably with their own translation of the Christian Bible slanted to make it fit their own beliefs."

He said, "Even without special translations you can interpret the Bible in a very wide variety of ways, find in it Divine Authority for just about every aberration of which the human race is capable. But the Church Of The Only Salvation did have its own Bible. Bishop Lewis gave me a copy. I tried to read it but the writing was appallingly bad. As far as I'm concerned there is only one Bible. The King James version."

After she was gone, to get herself organized, I made myself a sandwich lunch and tried to get more information about Stagatha from the library bank. It was an Earth-type planet with about the same proportion of land to water. The inhabitants were humanoid. I've often wondered why there are so many humanoid, as near as dammit human, races throughout the galaxy. Was there some Expansion, from Somewhere, before the dawn of history? But on every world there is the evolutionary evidence that cannot be denied that Man descended from lower life forms. Or is there some Divine Plan?

But I'm just a spaceman, not a philosopher.

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There were photographs of typical Stagathans. These could have been taken on practically any beach on Earth or any Man-colonized planet. The males were, to all outward appearances, well-endowed (but not abnormally so) men. The females tended to be busty, but firm-breasted. The only thing odd was that these photographs had been taken in the streets of a Stagathan town, not at a seaside resort. I finally got around to looking at the vehicles and buildings in the background. Electric cars (I thought). Dwellings, offices, shops — but nothing over one story and everything with a flat roof.

And that was all. There was no trade with other worlds, no exports, no imports. There had been very little contact with outsiders since the first landing by Commodore Shakespeare, that same Commodore Shakespeare after whom your Shakespearean Sector was named. Every so often some minor vessel of the Survey Service would drop in, just showing the flag and for rest and recreation. But why, I wondered, should the Church Of The Only Salvation be interested in the planet?

But I had things to do. Bills to pay, outward clearance to be obtained and all the rest of it. Not much was required in the way of stores; my tissue culture vats were in good order and I could program the autochef to turn out quite fair imitations of Scotch whiskey and London gin. Flour I needed, and fresh eggs, and a few cases of the not-too-bad local table wines. Regarding these, I based my order on what I regarded as normal consumption by two people for the duration of the voyage. I could have cut that order by half....

I made my pre-lift-off checks. Everything was in order, as it almost always was. She was a reliable little brute, was *Little Sister.* When I was walking around the outside of her, just admiring her, a small motorcade approached from the spaceport gates. There were four archaic-looking ground cars, black-painted, steam-driven, each emitting a thick cloud of dirty smoke from its funnel. From the first one Bishop Agatha Lewis disembarked, followed by half a dozen men and women, dressed in plain black and with broad-brimmed black hats like the one she was wearing. The men were all heavily bearded. Similar parties got out from the other three cars.

I walked up to the she-bishop and threw her a smart salute. She did not quite ignore me, but her curt nod was of the don't-bother-me-now variety. She made no attempt to introduce me to the assembled elders and deaconesses and deacons or whatever they were. Oh, well, I was only the captain. *And* the owner. I was only a space-going cabbie. I went back inside the ship to sulk.

Before long an elderly woman, followed by four men, carrying between them two heavy trunks, came in. She asked me, quite politely, "Where do we put these?" I showed them. The

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men went back outside.

She sat down at the table, noticed the tea things that I had not cleared away yet after my afternoon break.

She asked, in a whisper, "Do you think that I might have a cup, Captain?"

I made a fresh pot and, with a clean cup, brought it in to her. I could hear some sort of hymn being sung outside, one of those *dreary* ones all about the blood of the lamb and so forth.

She murmured, as she sipped appreciatively, "We shall all miss the dear bishop. But we, the synod, decided that she would be the right and proper person to send to Stagatha." She helped herself to a chocolate biscuit, crunched into it greedily. "Surely the similarity of the names is no coincidence. There was a St. Agatha, you know. Not that we approve of the Popish church and their beliefs." She poured herself more tea, added cream and was generous with the sugar. "Yes. We shall all of us miss the dear bishop — although, perhaps, her interpretation of the Word has been a mite too strict."

I said, "I still haven't been told why Bishop Lewis is going to Stagatha."

She said, "I thought that you knew. It is because those unhappy people, on that world, are living in a state of darkness, are brands to be plucked from the burning. We heard about it from a spaceman, a young fellow called Terry Gowan, one of the engineers aboard the *Cartographer*, a Survey Service ship. Would you know him?"

I said that I didn't. (It is truly amazing how so many planetlubbers have the erroneous idea that everybody in Space, naval or mercantile, knows everybody else.)

"A very nice young man. A *religious* young man. His ship set down here a few weeks after a visit to Stagatha. One of our people went on board her with books and pamphlets. The only one of the crew who was interested was Terry. He came to our prayer meetings. He talked about Stagatha. He brought us audio-visual records that he had taken. We were shocked. Those people, as human as you and me, going about completely ... unclothed. And their *heathen* religion! Do you know, they worship their sun...."

I didn't see much wrong with that. After all, sun-worship is logical. And as long as you don't go to the horrid extreme of tearing the still-beating hearts out of the breasts of sacrificial virgins, it has much to recommend it. The sun, after all — your sun, Earth's sun, Stagatha's sun, anybody's sun — is the source of all life. And there are Man-colonized planets, such as Arcadia, where naturism is a way of life, although the Arcadians don't quite make a religion of it.

"None of the other churches," the old lady went on, "has sent a missionary to Stagatha. But *somebody* has to...."

"And Bishop Lewis was your obvious choice," I said.

"Why, yes," she almost laughed.

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I was beginning to like the old dear. She had told me, as plainly as she could, that dear Agatha was being kicked upstairs. Literally.

Suddenly she stiffened and with a swift motion pushed her half-full teacup across the table so that it was in front of me. She was just in time. Bishop Lewis came into the cabin and stood there, staring down at us suspiciously.

She asked, "Why are you still here, Sister Lucille?"

The old lady got to her feet and bowed deferentially and said, "I was just keeping Captain Grimes company while he had his tea, Your Reverence. And I was telling him about our work."

"Indeed?" Her voice was very cold. "Since when were you one of our missioners, Sister Lucille?"

That business with the teacup had been a fair indication of which way the wind was blowing, but I made sure.

I asked, "Would you care for tea, Madame Bishop? I asked Sister Lucille to join me, but she refused."

"As she should have done, Captain Grimes, and as I shall do. Nowhere in Holy Writ are such unclean beverages as tea or coffee mentioned. Members of our Church are forbidden to partake of them."

And that was that.

He paused for refreshment, sipping from his newly filled tankard.

Kitty asked, "And what about wine? That's mentioned quite a few times."

"Yes," said Grimes. "Noah planted a vineyard and then made his own wine after he ran the Ark aground on Mount Ararat. Then he got drunk on his own tipple and the Almighty did not approve."

"But, in the New Testament, there's the story of the wedding feast and the water-into-wine miracle."

"According to Bishop Agatha, and according to her Church's own translation of the Bible, that wine was no more than unfermented fruit juice."

I'll not bore you (he went on) with a long account of the voyage out to Stagatha. It was not one of the happiest voyages in my life. On previous occasions, when carrying a female passenger, I found that familiarity breeds attempt. Mutual attempt. But there just wasn't any familiarity. At nights — we maintained a routine based on the twenty-hour day of Warrenhome — the portable screen was always in place, dividing the cabin into two sleeping compartments. Once we were out and clear and on the way, I put on my usual shirt-and-shorts uniform and Her Reverence ordered me — ordered *me*, aboard my own ship — to cover myself decently. Smoking was forbidden, except in the control cab with the communicating door *sealed*. Meals were a misery. I regard myself as quite a fair cook and can make an autochef do things that its makers would never

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have so much as dreamed of, but ... Boiled meat and vegetables for lunch, the same for dinner. Breakfast — boiled eggs. No ham or bacon, of course. The wine that I had stocked up with went almost untouched; I just don't like drinking it during a meal while my companion sticks to water. And *she* soon went through the ship's stock of orange juice — she liked that — leaving me with none to put with my gin.

She had brought her own supply of tapes for the playmaster, mainly sermons of the fire-and-brimstone variety and uninspiring hymns sung by remarkably untuneful choirs. Some of those sermons were delivered by herself. I had to admit she had something. She was a born rabble rouser. Had she been peddling some line of goods with greater appeal than the dreary doctrines of her freak religion, she might have finished up as dictator of a planet rather than as the not-very-popular boss cocky of an obscure sect. Might have finished up? But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I dutifully read the Bible, in that horridly pedestrian translation, which she had given me. I did not think that I should ever become a convert. Unluckily, I was rather low on reading matter of my own choice — books, that is — and my stock of microfilmed novels I could not enjoy because of her continous monopoly of the playmaster.

Anyhow, at last the time came when I stopped the Mannschenn Drive unit and *Little Sister* sagged back into the normal Continuum. There were the usual phenomena, the warped perspective and all that, and (for me) a brief session of déjà vu. I saw Agatha Lewis as a sort of goddess in flowing black robes, brandishing a whip. It frightened me. And then things snapped back to normal.

I had made a good planetfall. We were only two days' run from Stagatha and made our approach to the world, under inertial drive, from north of the plane of ecliptic. There was no need for me to get in radio touch with Aerospace Control. There wasn't any Aerospace Control. As far as I could gather from the information in my library banks, Entry Procedure for just about every known planet in the galaxy, one just came in, keeping a sharp lookout for airships, selected a landing place, and landed. It all seemed rather slipshod, but if the Stagathans liked it, who was I to complain?

The planet looked good from Space. Blue seas, green and brown land masses, relatively small polar icecaps. There was very little cloud except for a dark and dirty-looking patch of dense vapor that practically obscured from view most of a large island almost on the equator. I studied it through the control cab binoculars and could see flickers of ruddy light within it. It could only be Stagatha's only active volcano. According to Survey Service accounts, it was unnamed and regarded with a sort of superstitious hor-

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ror. Nobody ever went near it. Looking down at it I thought that I could understand why. Even from a great distance I got the impression of utter ugliness.

Whenever possible, when making a landing on a strange planet with no spaceport facilities, I adhere to Survey Service standard practice, timing my descent from close orbit to coincide with sunrise. That way every irregularity of the ground is shown up by the long shadows. Agatha Lewis had told me to set the ship down as close as possible to one of the cities. Not that there were any *real* cities, just largish country towns, most of them on the banks of rivers, set among fields and forests.

So I dropped down through the early-morning sky, feeling the usual sense of pleasurable anticipation. I enjoy shiphandling and, too, this to me would be a new and almost certainly interesting world. But I wasn't as happy as I should have been. *She* insisted on coming into the control cab with me, which meant that I was not able to smoke my pipe.

My own intention had been not to pass low over the town. Inertial drive units are *noisy* — to anybody outside the ship, that is — and it would be, I thought, stupid to annoy the citizenry by waking them before sparrowfart. But Agatha Lewis insisted that I make what I considered to be the ill-mannered approach. As it turned out, I needn't have worried about disturbing the sleep of the natives. But I did interrupt their dawn service. They were in the central plaza, all of them — men, women, and children — wearing their symbolic black cloaks that they threw aside as the first rays of the rising sun struck through between and over the low buildings. They stared up at us. We stared down. The bishop hissed in disgust at the sight of all that suddenly revealed nakedness.

She ... she snarled, "Now you know why I have come to this world. To save these poor sinners from their utter degradation."

I said, "They didn't look all that degraded to me. They were clean, healthy. Quite attractive, some of them...."

"But their heathen worship, Captain Grimes! The baring of their bodies...."

I said, "If God had meant us to go around without clothes we'd have been born naked."

"Ha, ha," interjected Kitty Kelly.

"You're as bad as she was," Grimes told her. "She didn't think that it was very funny either. But it shut her up. I was able to land Little Sister *in peace and quiet."*

"And then you got your gear off and went to romp with the happy nudists, I suppose."

"Ha, ha. Not with her *around."*

So I landed in the middle of this grassy field. Well, it looked like grass, and some odd-looking quadrupeds

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were grazing on it until we scared them off with the racket of the inertial drive. I made the routine tests of the atmosphere, not that it was really necessary as the Survey Service had already certified it fit for human consumption. I opened up both airlock doors. Bishop Agatha was first out of the ship. She stood there, in her stifling black clothing, glaring disapprovingly at the sun. I joined her. The fresh air tasted good, was fragrant with the scent of the grass that we had crushed with our setdown, with that of the gaudy purple flowers decorating clumps of low, green-blue foliaged bushes.

I thought that whether or not *she* approved, I was going to wear shirt-and-shorts rig while on this planet. I didn't know for how long I should have to stay; the agreement was that I should wait until the mission was well established and, at intervals, send reports to Warrenhome by means of my Carlotti radio. I couldn't get through directly, of course. The messages would have to be beamed to Baniskil, the nearest planetary Carlotti station, and relayed from there. After I was gone, Agatha would have to wait for the next Survey Service ship to make a call — which might be a matter of months, or even years — before she could make further contact with those who had been her flock.

Anyhow, we stood there in the sunlight, the warm breeze, myself enjoying the environment, she obviously not. We did not talk. We watched the small crowd walking out from the town. As they grew closer, I could see how like they were to humans — our kind of humans — and how unlike. Their faces had eyes and nose and mouth, but their ears were long, pointed, and mobile. The hair on their heads was uniformly short and a sort of dark olive green in color. There was a complete absence of body hair. Their skins were golden brown. There was a something ... odd about their lower limbs. (Their ancestors, I discovered later, had been animals not dissimilar to the Terran kangaroo.) But they all possessed what we would regard as human sexual characteristics. Apart from necklaces and bracelets and anklets of gold and glittering jewels, they were all of them naked.

Their leader, a tall man with a strong, pleasant, rather horselike face, walked up to me, stiffened to what was almost attention and threw me quite a smart salute with his six-fingered hand. Obviously he was not unused to dealing with visiting spacemen and, even though he himself went naked, knew the meaning of uniforms and badges of rank.

He said, in almost accentless Standard English, "Welcome to Stagatha, Captain."

I returned his salute and said, "I am pleased to be here, sir."

This did not suit the lady bishop. She was the VIP, not myself. She said a few words in a language strange to me. I was not entirely surprised. I knew

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that each night during the voyage she had retired to her bed with a slutor — a sleep tutor. She must, somehow, have obtained the necessary language capsules from that visiting Survey Service ship, *Cartographer*. I should have made some attempt myself to learn the language — but linguistically I'm a lazy bastard and always have been. Wherever I've gone I've always found somebody who could speak English.

The Stagathan turned to Agatha Lewis and bowed. Despite his lack of clothing it was a very dignified gesture. She returned this salutation with the slightest of nods. She went on talking in a harsh, angry voice. He grinned, looked down at himself and gave a very human shrug. She went on talking.

He turned to me and said, "For you I am very sorry, Captain. Now we go."

They went.

After I had gazed my fill upon a fine selection of retreating naked female buttocks, I turned to the bishop and asked, "What was all that about, Your Reverence?"

She looked at me very coldly and said, "I was telling these heathen, in their own language, to cover their nakedness."

I said, greatly daring, "They are dressed more suitably for this climate than we."

She said something about lecherous spacemen and then returned to the ship. I followed her. I busied myself with various minor chores while she opened one of the large trunks that had been put aboard before we left Warrenhome. She seemed to be unpacking. It was clothing, I noticed, that she was pulling out and spreading over the deck. She must be looking, I thought, for something cool to wear during the heat of the day. The next time I looked at her she was stowing a quantity of drab raiment into a large backpack.

When she was finished she said, "We will now go to the city, Captain Grimes."

"We haven't had lunch yet," I told her.

"Doing the Lord's work, according to His bidding, will be nourishment enough," she told me. "Please pick up the bag that I have packed and follow me."

"Why?" I demanded.

"It is essential," she said, "that we arrive in the central square prior to the noon service."

"Why?"

"It is not for you to question the Lord's bidding."

I said that I was a spaceship pilot, not a porter. She said that as long as I was on the payroll of her Church I was obliged to do as she required. I wasn't sure of the legality of it all but ... After all, I had to live with the woman. Anything-for-a-quiet-life Grimes, that's me. I did, however, insist that I dress more suitably for the expedition than in what I was wearing at the time — long trousers, shirt, necktie, and uniform jacket. I went into the shower cubicle

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with a change of clothing and emerged in short-sleeved, open-necked shirt, kilt, and sandals. She glared at me.

"Are you going native, Captain?"

"No, Your Reverence. I have changed into suitable shore-going civilian rig."

"You are not to accompany *me* dressed like that."

"Then hump your own bluey," I told her.

She didn't know what I meant, of course, so I had to translate from Australian into Standard English.

"Then carry your own bag," I said.

She didn't like it but realized that if we wasted any more time in argument we should be late for the noon service. She swept out of the ship with me, her beast of burden, plodding behind. It was too hot a day to be encumbered with a heavy backpack but, at least, I was less uncomfortable than I should have been in formal uniform.

In other circumstances I should have enjoyed the walk — that springy, almost-grass underfoot, the tuneful stridulations of what I assumed to be the local version of insects, occasional colorful flights of what I assumed to be birds but later discovered to be small, gaudy, flying mammals.

But I was unable to loiter. Her Reverence set the pace, and a spanking one it was. That woman, I thought, must have ice water in her veins, to be able to stride along like that while wearing all that heavy, body-muffling clothing. We came to the boundary of the field, to a dirt road, to the beginnings of the houses. There were people abroad, coming out of the low buildings, setting off in the same direction as the one that we were taking. There were men and women and children. They looked at us curiously — as well they might! — but not in an unmannerly fashion. They were dressed — undressed — for the climate. Her Reverence was suitably attired for a midwinter stroll over a polar icecap.

We came to the central square. It was paved with marble slabs but, breaking the expanse of gleaming stone, were beds of flowering bushes and fountains in the spray of which the sun was making rainbows. In the middle of the square was a tall obelisk, surrounded by concentric rings of gleaming metal — brass? gold? — set in the marble. Hard by this was a tripod made of some black metal from which was suspended a huge brass gong. A tall, heavily muscled man — I'll call him a man, at any nude resort on Earth or any Terran colony world the only glances that he would have attracted would have been admiration — naked apart from his ornaments of gold and jewels, was standing by the tripod, holding, as though it were a ceremonial spear, a long-handled striker with leather-padded head. A woman — and she was truly beautiful — was sitting cross-legged, all her attention on the slow, almost imperceptible shortening of the shadow cast by the obelisk.

She turned to the man by the gong,

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uttered one short word. His muscles flexed as he raised the striker, brought the head of it, with a powerful sweeping motion, into contact with the surface, radiant with reflected sunlight, of the great brass disc.

A single booming note rolled out and the people, from streets and alleys, came flooding into the plaza. They were marching rather than merely walking, dancing rather than marching, and the clashing of their glittering cymbals was not without an odd, compelling rhythm. They were unclothed (of course), all of them — the men, the women, and the children — although bright metal and jewels glowed on glowing, naked flesh. They formed up into groups, all of them facing inwards, towards the central obelisk. The ... the timekeeper was standing now, arms upraised above her head. She was singing, in a high, sweet voice. It was not the sort of noise that normally I should have classed as music, the tonality was not one that I was accustomed to, the rhythms too subtle, but here, in these circumstances, it was ... right. The man at the gong was accompanying her, stroking the metal surface with the head of his striker, producing a deep murmuring sound. And all the people were singing.

I didn't need to understand the words to know that it was a hymn of praise.

"What are you *standing* there for?" demanded the she-bishop.

"What else should I do?" I countered.

She snarled wordlessly, literally tore the backpack from my shoulders. She opened it, spilled the drab heap of secondhand clothing onto the marble paving. Close by us were children, about twenty in this group, who, until now, had been ignoring us. Her Reverence snatched up a rust black dress, forced it down over the body of a struggling, bewildered little girl. "Can't you help?" she snarled at me. By the time that she got her second victim clothed, the first one was naked again and running to the timekeeper, the priestess, bawling with fright and bewilderment.

Things started to happen then.

I was unarmed, of course, with not so much as a stungun on low power. Contrary to so many space stories the toting of firearms by spacemen, merchant spacemen especially, on other people's planets is not encouraged. It didn't take long for two hefty wenches to immobilize me, one on each side of me, both of them holding me tightly. I could do nothing but watch as four men seized Agatha, threw her down to the paving and, despite her frenzied struggles, stripped her. A knife gleamed and I yelled wordlessly — but it was being used as a tool, not a weapon, to slice through cloth and not through skin. Her long body, revealed as the last of underwear was slashed away, was disgustingly pallid. It needn't have been. She could have made use of the UV lamps every time that she had a shower during the passage out, as I had

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done. She was pallid and she was flabby, physically (at least) far inferior to those who were punishing her for her act of ... sacrilege. Yes. Sacrilege. They held her there, in the blazing noonday sunlight, while the rags of her clothing were gathered up, and those other rags, those donations of used clothing with which she had tried to clothe the happily naked.

There was that pile of drab, tattered cloth and there was that big lens, a great burning glass, that was brought to bear upon the rubbish, concentrating upon it the purifying rays of the sun. There was the acrid smoke, and then the first red glimmer of smolder, and then flames, almost invisible in the strong sunlight.

And all the time Agatha was writhing and screaming, calling out not in Standard English but in the Stagathan language that she had learned. What she was saying I did not know, but it sounded like (and probably was) curses.

The bonfire died down.

A man whom I recognized as the leader of the party that had come out to the ship strode up to me. His face was grave.

"Captain," he said, "take this woman from here. She has insulted our God."

I said lamely, "She means well."

He said, "The path of the Mountain We Do Not Name is paved with good intentions."

My two captors released me.

The four men holding Agatha Lewis's wrists and ankles let go of her. She stumbled to her feet and stood there in that classic pose, one arm shielding her breasts, the other hand over her pudenda. With a younger, more shapely woman the attitude would have been prettily appealing; with her it was merely ludicrous. Her face was scarlet with humiliation. But it wasn't only her face. And it wasn't only humiliation. It was sunburn.

Kitty said, "When you mentioned the gleam of a knife I thought that you were going to tell us that Bishop Agatha suffered the same sort of martyrdom as Saint Agatha. Her breasts were cut off."

Grimes said, "I know. I did some checking up. There was so much odd parallelism about the whole business. But my Agatha suffered no worse than severely frizzled nipples. Very painful, I believe. I lent her my shirt for the walk back to the ship but, by that time, it was too late."

So we got ourselves back to the ship (he continued) with Her Reverence in a state of shock. It had all been such a blow to her pride, her prudery, her own kind of piety. The pyschological effects were more severe than the physical ones, painful as those most obviously were. And she had to let me apply the soothing lotions to her body. Oh, she *hated* me.

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Once she was muffled up in a robe, wincing as every slightest motion brought the fabric into contact with her inflamed breasts, I said, "It is obvious, Your Reverence, that you are not welcome here. I suggest that we get off the planet."

She said, "We shall do no such thing."

She wanted her bunk set up then and the privacy screen put in position. I busied myself with various small tasks about the ship, trying not to make too much noise. But I needn't have bothered. I could hear her; the partition was not soundproof. First of all she was sobbing, and then she was praying. It was all very embarrassing, far more so than her nudity had been.

Late in the afternoon she came out. As well as a long, black robe, she was wearing her wide-brimmed hat and almost opaque dark glasses. She walked slowly to the airlock and then out onto the grassy ground. I followed her. She stood there, staring at the westering sun. Her expression frightened me. Rarely have I seen such naked hate on anybody's face.

"Your Reverence," I said, "I am still of the opinion that we should leave this world."

"Are you, an Earthman, frightened of a bunch of naked savages?" she sneered.

"Naked, perhaps," I said, "but not savages." I pointed almost directly upwards to where one of the big solar-powered airships, on its regular cargo and passenger run, was sailing overhead. "Savages could never have made a thing like that."

"Savagery and technology," she said, "can co-exist. As *you* should know."

"But these people are not savages," I insisted.

"You dare to say that, Captain Grimes, after you witnessed what they did to *me*, the messenger of God."

"Of *your* God. And, anyhow, you asked for it."

Even from behind her dark glasses her eyes were like twin lasers aimed at me.

"Enough," she said coldly. "I would remind you, Captain Grimes, that you are still my servant and, through me, of the Almighty. Please prepare to lift ship."

"Then you are taking my advice?"

"Of course not. We shall proceed forthwith to the Mountain That Is Not Named."

Oh, well, if she wanted to do some sight-seeing, I did not object. Tourism would get us into far less trouble (I thought) than attempting to interfere with perfectly innocent and rather beautiful religious rituals. Quite happily I went back into the ship, straight to the control cab, and started to do my sums or, to be more exact, told the pilot-computer to do my sums for me. *Little Sister*, although a deep-space ship in miniature, was also a pinnace quite capable of flights, short or long, within a planetary atmosphere. *She* joined me as I was studying the read-

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outs, looking at the chart and the extrapolation of the Great Circle course.

"Well," she asked.

"If we lift now we can be at Nameless Mountain by sunrise tomorrow, without busting a gut."

"There is no need to be vulgar, Captain. But sunrise will be a good time. It will coincide with *their* dawn service."

I didn't bother to try to explain to her the concept of longitudinal time differences and, in any case, possibly some town or city was on the same meridian as the volcano — but then, of course, there would be other factors, such as latitude and the sun's declination, to be considered. So I just agreed with her. And then, with the ship buttoned up, I got upstairs.

It was an uneventful flight. I had the controls on full automatic so there was no need for me to stay in the cab. Too, according to the information at my disposal, there was very little (if any) traffic in Stagatha's night skies. The sun ruled their lives.

We were both of us back in the control cab as we approached the volcano. She was looking disapprovingly at the mug of coffee from which I was sipping. I hoped sardonically that she had enjoyed the glass of water with which she had started her day. Outside the ship it was getting light, although not as light as it should have been at this hour. We were flying through dense smoke and steam, with visibility less than a couple of meters in any direction. Not that I had any worries. The three-dimensional radar screen was showing a clear picture of what was below, what was ahead. It was not a pretty picture but one not devoid of a certain horrid beauty. Towering, contorted rock pinnacles, evilly bubbling lava pools, spouting mud geysers.... The ship, still on automatic, swerved to steer around one of these that was hurling great rocks into the air....

I said, "We're here."

She said, "We have yet to reach the main crater rim."

"*The main crater rim?*" I repeated.

"You're not afraid, Captain, are you? Didn't you tell me that this ship of yours can take anything that anybody cares to throw at her?"

"But ... An active volcano ... One that seems to be on the verge of blowing its top in a major eruption...."

"Are you a vulcanologist, Captain?"

So we stood on, feeling our way through the murk. There was more than volcanic activity among the special effects. Lightning writhed around us, a torrent — flowing upwards or downwards? — of ghastly violet radiance that would have been blinding had it not been for the automatic polarization of the viewports. And ahead was sullen, ruddy glare ... No, not *glare*. It was more like a negation of light than normal luminosity. It was the Ultimate Darkness made visible.

Little Sister maintained a steady course despite the buffeting that she

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must be getting. And then she was in clear air, the eye of the storm as it were. We could see things visually instead of having to rely upon the radar screens. We were over the vast crater, the lake of dull, liquid fire, the semi-solid, dark glowing crust through cracks in which glared white incandescence. In the center of this lake was a sort of island, a black, truncated cone.

"Set us down there," *she* said.

"Not bloody likely," I said.

"Set us down there."

She was standing now and her hand was on my shoulder, gripping it painfully. And ... And ... How can I describe it? It was as though some power were flowing from her to me, through me. I fought it. I tried to fight it. And then I tried to rationalize. After all, the metal of which *Little Sister* was built, an isotope of gold, was virtually guaranteed to be proof against *anything*. If anything should happen to her I could go to her builders on Electra and demand my money back. (Not that my money had paid for her in the first place.) Joke.

I had the ship back on manual control. I made a slow approach to the central island, hovered above it. I had been expecting trouble, difficulty in holding the ship where I wanted her, but it was easy. Too easy. Suspiciously easy.

I let her fall, slowly, slowly, the inertial drive just ticking over. I felt the faint jar, a very faint jar, as she landed on the flat top, the perfectly smooth top of the truncated cone.

She said, "Open the airlock doors."

I tried to protest but the words wouldn't come.

She said, "Open the airlock doors."

I thought, *And so we fill the ship with stinking, sulfurous gases. But the internal atmosphere can soon be purified.*

On the console before me I saw the glowing words as I actuated the switch. INNER DOOR OPEN. OUTER DOOR OPEN.

She was gone from behind me, back into the main cabin. I got up from my chair, followed her. She was going outside, I realized. She should have asked me for a spacesuit; it would have given her some protection against the heat, against an almost certainly poisonous atmosphere. Some of this was already getting inside the ship, an acridity that made my eyes water, made me sneeze. But it didn't seem to be worrying her.

She passed through both doors.

I stood in the little chamber, watching her. She was standing on the heat-smoothed rock, near, too near to the edge of the little plateau. Was the silly bitch going to commit spectacular and painful suicide? But I was reluctant to leave the security — the illusory security? — of my ship to attempt to drag her to safety. No, it wasn't cowardice. Not altogether. I just *knew* that she knew what she was doing.

(If I'd known more I should have been justified in going out to give her a push!)

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She stood there, very straight and tall, in black silhouette against the dull glow from the lake of fire. Her form wavered, became indistinct as a dark column of smoke eddied about her. Still she stood there while the smoke thinned, vanished. It was as though it had been absorbed by her body.

But that was impossible, wasn't it?

She walked back to the airlock. The skin of her face seemed to be much darker than it had been — but that was not surprising. It seemed to me — but that must have been imagination — that her feet did not touch the surface over which she was walking.

She said as she approached me, "Take me back to the city."

I obeyed. No matter what her order had been, no matter how absurd or dangerous, I should have obeyed. When first I had met her I had been conscious of her charisma but had learned to live with it, to distrust it and to despise it. Now neither distrust nor contempt would have been possible.

We got upstairs.

No sooner were we on course than the volcano blew up. The blast of it hit us like a blow from something solid. I wasn't able to watch as I was too busy trying to keep the ship under some sort of control as she plunged through the fiery turbulence, through the smoke and the steam and the fiery pulverized dust, through the down-stabbing and up-thrusting lightning bolts.

And, through it all, *she* was laughing.

It was the first time that I had heard her laugh.

It was an experience that I could well have done without.

"I need some more beer," he said, "to wash the taste of that volcanic dust out of my throat. After all the years I still remember it."

She refilled his mug, and then her own.

"Did the dust get inside your ship?" she asked.

"It got everywhere," *he told her. "All over the entire bloody planet."*

We set down in that same field where we had made our first landing. According to the chronometer it wanted only an hour to local, apparent noon. but the sky was overcast. The air was chilly. *She* ordered me to open one of her trunks. In it was a further supply of the cast-off clothing that she had brought from Warrenhome. And there were books. Bibles, I assumed, or the perversion of Holy Writ adopted by *Her* church. I opened one but was unable, of course, to read the odd, flowing Stagathan characters.

I filled a backpack with the clothing. While I was so doing she took something else from the trunk. It was a whip; haft and tapering lash were all of three meters long. It was an evil-looking thing.

We left the ship. She took the lead. I trudged behind. As she passed one of

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the flowering bushes, its blossoms drab in the dismal gray light, she slashed out with the whip, cracking it expertly, severing stems and twigs, sending tattered petals fluttering to the ground.

We walked into the city.

We came to the central square, with the obelisk (but it was casting no shadow), the great gong (but it was now no more than an ugly disk of dull, pitted metal), the celebrants and the worshippers.

But there was nothing for them to worship. The sky was one, uniform gray with not so much as a diffuse indication of the position of the sun. The people were all, as they had been at that other service, naked but now their nudity was ... ugly. A thin drizzle was starting to fall, but it was mud rather than ordinary rain, streaking the shivering skins of the miserable people.

The priest standing by the gong, the man with the striker, was the first to see us. He pointed at us, shouting angrily. He advanced towards us, still shouting, menacing us with his hammer. Behind him others were now shouting, and screaming. They were blaming us for the dense cloud that had hidden their god from sight.

She stood her ground.

Suddenly her lash snaked out, whipped itself around the striker and tore it from the priest's hands, sent it clattering to the mud-slimed marble paving. It cracked out again, the tip of it slashing across the man's face, across his eyes. He screamed, and that merciless whip played over his body, drawing blood with every stroke.

And *She* was declaiming in a strong, resonant voice, with one foot planted firmly upon the squirming body of the hapless, blinded priest, who had fallen to the ground, laying about her with the whip.

Even then, at the cost of a few injuries, they could have overpowered her, have taken her from behind. But the heart was gone from them. Their god had forsaken them. And *She* ... *She* was speaking with the voice of a god. Or was a god speaking through her? She was possessed. The black charisma of her was overpowering. I opened the backpack and began to distribute the cast-off clothing. Hands — the hands of men, women, and children — snatched the drab rags from me eagerly. And there was something odd about it. It seemed as though that backpack were a bottomless bag. It could never have held sufficient clothing to cover the nakedness of a crowd of several thousand people. Some time later, of course, I worked things out. Converts must have gone back into their homes for the ceremonial black robes that they doffed at the dawn service and resumed at sunset. But, even so ... How could those robes have assumed the appearance of, say, ill-cut, baggy trousers? Imagination, it must have been. Even though I could not understand what she was saying, I was under the spell of Her voice.

And it frightened me.

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I felt my agnosticism wavering.

And I *like* being an agnostic.

Oh, well, at a time of crisis there is always one thing better than presence of mind — and that is absence of body.

I left her preaching to the multitude and walked back to the ship. I did worse than that. When I was back on board I collected everything of hers, every last thing, and lugged it out through the airlock on to a plastic sheet that I spread on the wet grass, covered it with another sheet.

And then I lifted off.

After all, I had done what I had contracted to do. I had carried her from Warrenhome to Stagatha (and the money for her fare had been deposited in my bank). I had stayed around until she had become established as a missionary. (Well, she had, hadn't she?)

I broke through that filthy overcast into bright sunlight. I began to feel less unhappy. I looked down at Stagatha. The entire planet, from pole to pole, was shrouded with smoke, or steam, or dust or — although this was unlikely — just ordinary cloud.

I wondered when their god would next show himself to the Stagathans and set course for Pengram, the nearest Man-colonized planet, where I hoped to be able to find further employment for *Little Sister* and myself.

"I don't think much of your Odd Gods," said Kitty Kelly. "After all, sun-worship is common enough. And so are evangelists of either sex who preach peculiar perversions of Christianity and are charismatic enough to make converts. But I would have expected you *to behave more responsibly. To go flying off, the way you did, leaving that poor woman to her fate...."*

"Poor woman? I was there, Kitty. You weren't. Too, I haven't finished yet."

I'd almost forgotten about Stagatha (he went on) when, some standard years later, I ran into Commander Blivens, captain of the survey ship *Cartographer.* I'd known Blivens slightly when I was in the Survey Service myself. Anyhow, I was at Port Royal, on Caribbea, owner-master of *Sister Sue,* which vessel had started her life as one of the Interstellar Transport Commission's Epsilon Class star tramps, *Epsilon Scorpii.* (She finally finished up as the Rim Worlds Confederacy's survey ship *Faraway Quest.* Yes, this very ship that we're aboard now.) But to get back to Blivens ... I was in the Trade Winds Bar with my chief officer, Billy Williams, quietly absorbing planter's punches when I heard somebody call my name. I couldn't place him at first but finally did so.

Then, for a while, it was the usual sort of conversation for those circumstances. What happened to old so-and-so? Did you hear that thingummy actually made rear admiral? And so on.

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I got around to asking Blivens what he was doing on Carribea.

"Just a spell of rest and recreation for my boys and girls," he told me. "And for myself. At one time I used to regard a rather odd but very human world called Stagatha as my R & R planet. The people as near human as makes no difference. Sun worshippers they were, *happy* sun worshippers. Unpolluted atmosphere, solar power used for everything. And not, like this overpriced dump, commercialized.

"But it's ruined now."

"How so?" I asked him.

"They've changed their religion. Some high-powered female missionary decided to save their souls. I suppose that some money-hungry tramp skipper carried her from her own planet, Warrenhome, to Stagatha. Somebody should find out who the bastard was and shoot him. And then, really to put the tin hat on things, there was a catastrophic volcanic eruption which threw the gods alone know how many tons of dust into the upper atmosphere and completely buggered the climate. So there was a switch from solar power to the not-very-efficient burning of fossil fuels — and still more airborne muck to obscure the sunlight.

"The missionary — the Lady Bishop, she called herself — called aboard to see me. She scared me, I don't mind admitting it. You'll never guess what her staff of office was. A dirty great whip. She demanded that I release one of my engineer officers to her service. The odd part was that she knew his name — Terry Gowan — and all about him. And Mr. Gowan seemed to know of her. It made sense, I suppose. He was one of those morose, Bible-bashing bastards himself. And, apart from the Bible in some odd version, his only reading was books on the engineering techniques in use during the Victorian era on Earth. He used to make models, working models, of steam engines and things like that.

"I gave him his discharge — which, as a Survey Service captain, I was entitled to do. You know the regulation. *Should a properly constituted planetary authority request the services of a specialist officer, petty officer or rating for any period, and provided that such officer, petty officer or rating signifies his or her willingness to enter the service of such planetary authority, and provided that the safe management of the ship not be affected by the discharge of one of her personnel with no replacement immediately available, then the commanding officer shall release such officer, petty officer or rating, paying him or her all monies due and with the understanding that seniority shall continue to accrue until the return of the officer, petty officer or rating to the Survey Service.*

"Anyhow, I don't think that anybody aboard *Cartographer* shed a tear for Gloomy Gowan, as he was known, when he was paid off. And he, I suppose, has been happy erecting dark, satanic mills all over the landscape for Her Holiness."

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"And so everybody was happy," I said sarcastically.

"A bloody good planet ruined," grumbled Blivens.

A few more years went by.

Again I ran into Blivens — Captain Blivens now — quite by chance. He was now commanding officer of the Survey Service base on New Colorado and I had been chartered by the Service — they often threw odd jobs my way — to bring in a shipment of fancy foodstuffs and tipples for the various messes.

I dined with Blivens in his quite palatial quarters.

He said, towards the end of the meal, "You remember when I last met you, Grimes ... I was captain of *Cartographer* then and we were talking about Stagatha...."

"I remember," I said.

"Well, I went there again. For the last time. Just one of those checking-up-showing-the-flag voyages that I had to make. But there wasn't any Stagatha. Not any more. The sun had gone nova. And as there hadn't been a Carlotti station on the planet no word had gotten out...."

The news shocked me.

All those people, incinerated.

And I couldn't help feeling that I was somehow responsible.

But it was just a coincidence.

Wasn't it?

"Of course it was," said Kitty Kelly brightly.

"Was it?" whispered Grimes. And then: "For I am a jealous God...."

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René Rebetez is well known in Latin America as a writer, lecturer, and documentary film maker. He travels a good deal between Mexico City and Bogota, where he grew up. He is at work on his first novel. This story is very short, but it lingers like a vivid nightmare...

The New Prehistory

BY

RENÉ REBETEZ

translated from the Spanish by Damon Knight

It began when my friend Metropoulos joined the long ticket line in front of the Mayer Cinema. I had never liked standing in line for anything; I waited to one side. Eating corn chips, I watched the women who passed, and the people who joined the line, pressed into it one by one like blobs of mercury.

The line moved slowly forward. with a monotonous scraping of feet on pavement. When I glanced at my friend's face, I saw that it was expressionless, slack-jawed. His eyes were glassy with boredom; his arms dangled like an ape's; his feet shuffled slowly.

I felt a sudden chill; somehow I knew what was about to happen. A fat lady had grown tired of waiting, even though she was only twenty places or so from the ticket window. She took a step, another, a third; the line curved with her. She turned her head indignantly, tried to break free; she ran and the line straightened again, dragging the poor woman back in spite of her struggles.

Now panic spread; they were all trying to break loose at once. The long line undulated in wild contortions, as if shaken by a gigantic hiccup. People were struggling, screaming and shouting. Tempers grew heated; there was a flurry of blows.

Around the newborn monster, a crowd was gathering. That was another custom in the cities, congregating to look at things: cranes, wrecking machines, blasting crews. Airplanes. Military parades. Political rallies. Crowds looking at billboards. Crowds looking at anything.

Myself, I had always hated crowds and lines of people. Not that I was antisocial, not at all; it was simply that I disliked humanity in the mass. Never had I dreamed that things would take

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such a turn, or that I would witness this transformation.

The people in line soon realized there was nothing they could do, or at least that there was no point in fighting among themselves. Tattered, bleeding, and crestfallen, at last they were still; an ominous silence fell over them. Then, little by little, like the sound of rushing water, there came the swelling voice of incredulity and terror.

It was obvious that these people could not pull themselves apart; something had bound them tightly together. Something that in the first few moments had been no more than a breath had rapidly changed into a viscous but tangible substance; very soon it had become a transparent gelatin, then a flexible cartilage like that of Siamese twins. A force unknown to mankind, latent in nature until now, had been unleashed: a psychological cancer that was gluing men together as if they were atoms of new elements in formation.

A restlessness came over the line. Like a huge centipede waking up, the monster slowly began to move down the street, hundreds of arms waving desperately. At the head of the column was a red-eyed man whose mouth was awry in a painful rictus. He was followed by a girl who had been proud of her beauty; now, disheveled, her makeup dissolved by tears, she moved like a sleepwalker. Then came a boy, his face pale with terror, then Metropoulos, my old friend, one more vertebra of the monstrous reptile. He passed without hesitating, deaf to my voice, his gaze fixed on the ground and his feet moving to the marching rhythm.

Gradually the movement grew faster, more erratic and frenzied. The long queue was like a string of carnival dancers, twisting and turning, performing a demonic conga in the street. Then, after a few frantic turns, the reptile sank to the pavement; each segment of its body was heaving, and a continual stertorous sound echoed in the half-open mouths, the nostrils like fluttering wings, the wild eyes.

It lasted only a moment; the reptile got up again. In it were a few dead and useless vertebrae. Dragging them along, the monster broke into its zigzag run again and disappeared down the street.

I had managed to get into the opening of a narrow doorway; from its shelter I watched the torpid crowd. Once more I knew what was going to happen. They were awakening gradually from the nightmare left behind by the great human serpent: now they were becoming aware of their own condition. They had turned into a gigantic amoeba; a thick protoplasm that had spurted out between them had bound them together like the cells of a honeycomb. There was not a single shout. Only a few faint groans and a murmur of helplessness came from the crowd.

The human serpent still seemed to

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know which was its head and which its tail, but the crowd-amoeba showed an immediate desire to spread in all directions. The human mass changed its shape from one instant to another in a grotesque and repellent manner: a convulsed macroscopic amoeba that stumbled and bounced painfully against the walls. A new being, gigantic and mindless, that moved down the street after its predecessor.

I don't remember how many days and nights I wandered those streets. Thousands of monsters of all sizes were roaming in the city. The lines at bakeries and bus stops had produced little reptiles of ten or so vertebrae each; the same for the lines at banks and confessionals. Larger ones had come from the lines at phone booths, movies, theaters, and other public places. The amoebas came from street crowds and public gatherings; they were spreading everywhere.

The strange ligature that had fastened the people together was really unbreakable. I saw one man who tried to cut it; the attempt ended in his painful death. The links that died by accident hung like dead leaves, without breaking the human chain. I saw a busload of people that had turned into a single mass. Unable to get out of the bus, they began destroying it. Whole buildings were being demolished by amoeba-crowds imprisoned inside. A shouting throng had formed itself into an immense clotted mass that swept away obstacles, filling the streets like a river: that one came from a political rally.

The few persons who were still separate scurried like rats to avoid touching the new organisms. All the same, most of them were being absorbed.

I don't want to know anything about that. I don't want to find myself transformed into something shapeless like an amoeba or a glob of spittle, nor to become the last segment of a gigantic worm. I cling to my human identity, my own individual personality. I am a man, not a limb or an organ.

Nevertheless, I know the battle is already lost. Before my eyes humanity is being transformed. I try to be impartial and tell myself that perhaps it is for the best, that this sudden mutation will bring with it a fundamental advance for humanity. But it's useless; these new forms of life repel me.

They have renounced forever the old way of life. It is impossible for them to live in rooms as they did before, to use elevators, sit in chairs, sleep in beds, travel in cars or planes. Obviously they can't return to their jobs, go to offices, mind stores, operate in clinics, act in theaters. Everything must be reorganized to suit the new conditions.

After the early days of fear and confusion, the new composite beings abandoned the cities. Unable to get into kitchens, pantries, and refrigerators, they swarmed out into the country.

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The sight of these reptiles and giant amoebas roaming the pastures or lurking in the woods is enough to turn my stomach. I think they have forgotten what they were. They eat insatiably: fruit, roots — and they eat animals alive. They haven't bothered to build shelters. One kind sleeps coiled up like a huge boa around a fire; the other kind, in a ball on the bare earth.

I don't know if they remember that they were once man.

So much time has passed, I have lost all perception of it. The evolution of the new beings has been demoniacally swift. They no longer try to add new links to their gigantic bodies; instead, when they meet a single person, they kill him. I have been living in the ruins of the cities, hiding from their gaze and their keen sense of smell, but I venture out now and then to spy on them.

Their appearance has changed enormously; now they are *another thing*. A few days ago I surprised two serpent-beings making love in a nearby field. It was grotesque and indescribable, a contorted self-flagellation. Now I know that each one of these beings had a common organism, an integrated physiological function, a single nervous system, a unified mind.

It was difficult for me to accept this, because in the old days when people were individuals, those who liked to form themselves into lines or crowds in the street were always mediocrities, morons. Intelligent people would not have been caught up in such foolishness. They have been destroyed; or

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else, like me, they are wandering in the ruins. But I have met no one else here.

In spite of everything, I acknowledge the strength of the new creatures, the technical mastery they are beginning to show. With the speed of their thousand hands and their thousand feet, they are raising strange narrow or circle edifices, making and transporting materials in the twinkling of an eye. They have made immense capes, with openings for their multiple heads, to protect themselves from the cold. Sometimes I hear their chorus of a thousand voices chanting strange guttural songs.

I suspect the day is not far off when they will build their own airplanes and limousines, as long as railway cars, or rounded and flat like flying saucers. The time will come, too, I have no doubt, when they will play golf.

But I don't want to know anything about that. I always hated crowds and lines of people. I cling to my human identity, to my own individual and separate personality. It's not that I'm antisocial; not at all, I repeat. But masses of humanity are distasteful to me. Never did I dream that things would take such a turn, or that I would witness this transformation.

I sit among the ruins. In the distance I can hear a gigantic chorus: the voice of the new prehistory. A new cycle is beginning.

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In which a budding author trades in his old Underwood for a used word processor, with astonishing results...

From the Desk of Gilmer C. Merton

BY
GENE WOLFE

Dear Miss Morgan:

No, you don't know me or anything about me — I got your name from *Literary Market Place.* My own name is Gilmer C. Merton, and I'm a writer. I say that I am one, even though I haven't sold anything yet, because I know I am. I have written a sci-fi novel, of which I enclose the first chapter and an outline of the remainder (is that a dirty word?) of the book.

Please understand me, Miss Morgan: *I have written the whole book,* and can send you complete ms. as soon as you ask for it. Will you represent me?

Sincerely yours,
Gilmer C. Merton
Gilmer C. Merton

Dear Mr. Merton:

Please send the rest of "Star Shuttle." Enclose $10 (no stamps) to cover postage and handling.

Yours truly,
GM
Georgia Morgan

Dear Miss Morgan:

Enclosed please find the remainder of my book *Star Shuttle* and a Postal Money Order for ten dollars. I hope you enjoy it.

You can have no idea how delighted I am that you are sufficiently interested in my book to wish to read the rest. I know something of your reputation now, having asked the Chief Assistant Librarian here in No. Velo City. It would be wonderful to have you for my agent.

Sincerely,
Gilmer C. Merton
Gilmer C. Merton

Dear Mr. Merton,

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I will definitely handle STAR SHUTTLE. When you sign and return the enclosed letter of agreement (I have already signed; please retain the *last* copy for your files), you will be a client of the GEORGIA MORGAN LITERARY AGENCY. Note that we do not handle short fiction, articles, or verse (Par. C.). I would, however, like to see any other book-length manuscripts, including non-fiction.

Cordially,

Georgia Morgan

P.S. Don't say sci-fi. That *is* an obscenity. Say SF.

Dear Miss Morgan:

Let me repeat again how much I appreciate your taking on my book. However, I wish you had told me where you intend to market it. Is that possible?

Your letter of agreement (top three copies) is enclosed, signed and dated as you asked. Let me repeat how happy I am to be your client.

Sincerely,

Gil Merton

Gilmer C. Merton

Dear Gil,

I sent your STAR SHUTTLE to the best editor I know, my great and good friend Saul Hearwell at Cheap Drugstore Paperbacks, Inc. Now I am happy to report that Saul offers an advance of $4,300 against CDPI's standard contract. I discussed the advance with him over lunch at Elaine's (not to worry, Saul paid), but he says CDPI's present financial position, though not critical, is somewhat weak, and he is not authorized to offer more than the standard advance. (Actually, that is four thou.; I got him up three hundred.) I could be wrong, Gil, but with a first novel, I don't think you will get a better offer than this anyplace, market conditions as they are. The "standard" contract is enclosed, as slightly altered by yrs. trly. (Note that I was able to hold onto 30% of video rights.) I advise you to sign it and return all copies to me soonest.

Cordially,

Georgia

P.S. You will receive half the advance on signing.

Dear Georgia. I have signed and dated all copies of the contract for my book. They are enclosed. Good job!

You will be happy to note that I have borrowed enough on my signature to trade in my old Underwood for a used word processor. (These are used words, ha, ha!) Interest is eighteen percent, but there is no penalty for early payment, and when I get the two thousand one hundred and fifty dollars it will be easy enough to pay off the rest of the loan, and I understand that *Hijo* and several other horror-genre shockers were written on this machine before Steven E. Presley's untimely death. With the help of this superb machine

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(as soon as I learn to run the damn thing) I hope to make much faster progress on new book, *Galaxy Shuttle.*

Sincerely,

Gil

Gil Merton

Dear Gil,

This is going to come as something of a shock to you, but I have just had a long phone conversation with Saul Hearwell, during which we discussed what Saul insists on referring to as "your problem." Meaning yours, Gil, not mine, though you are my problem too, of course, or rather your problems are my problems.

STAR SHUTTLE is bylined "Gilbert C. Merton," and Saul does not consider that catchy enough. Of course, I suggested "Gil Merton" right away. Saul feels that is an improvement, but not a big enough one. (Am I making myself clear?) Anyway, Saul would like to see you adopt a zippier pen name, something along the lines of Berry Longear or Oar Scottson Curd. Whatever you like, but please, not Robert A. anything. (Gil Donadil might be nice. ???) The choice is yours, to be sure; but let me know soonest so I can get back to Saul.

Cordially,

Gm

Georgia

P.S. I rather hate to bring up this delicate matter, Gil, but you will get $1,835, and not the $2,150 you mention. In other words, my commission will be taken out. And don't forget you'll have to pay taxes on the residue.

Dear Georgia,

This is a wonderful contraption, but Steven Presley seems to have programmed it with some odd subroutines. I'll tell you in detail when I've figured out what all of them are.

The new byline I've chosen is Gilray Gunn. What do you think of it? If you like it, please pass it along to Mr. Hearwell.

I had assumed I paid you your commissions. Rereading our letter of agreement, I see that you receive all payments and deduct your part before passing mine on to me. I see the sense of that — it saves me from writing a check and so forth.

Sincerely,

Gil

Gil Merton

(Wolf Moon)

Dear Gil,

Good news! Saul likes your new byline, and I've already got a nibble from Honduras on STAR SHUTTLE. Rejoice! When will I be seeing GALAXY SHUTTLE?

Cordially,

Gm

Georgia

Dear Miss Morgan:

Thank you for your recent communication. I have altered the title of "Galaxy Shuttle" to COME, DARK LUST.

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It is to be bylined *Wolf Moon*, as I indicated on the enclosed ms. See to it.

I require the half advance now due on "Star Shuttle" immediately. North Velo Light & Power Co. is threatening to shut off my service.

Wolf Moon
(Gilbert C. Merton)

Dear Gil,

Saul assured me you will get your money as soon as everything clears CDPI's Accounting Department. Have patience.

Now — the most stupendous news I've passed along to one of my "stable" in many a year! Saul was absolutely bowled over by COME, DARK LUST! He plans sym. hc., trade, and mass market editions. He's trying to get an advertising budget! He's talking an advance of $9,000, which is practically a signal that he's willing to go to $10,000.

Gil, I trust you're working on a sequel already (COME AGAIN, DARK LUST???), but meanwhile do you have any short stories or whatever kicking around? Particularly anything along the lines of your fabulous CDL? I'd love to see them.

Fondly,
Gm
Georgia

Dear Miss Morgan:

I have legally changed my name to Wolf Moon. Gilmer C. Merton is dead. (see the enclosed clipping from the *No. Velo City Morning Advertiser.*)

In the future, please address me as "Mr. Moon," or in moments of extreme camaraderie, "Wolf."

I require the monies due me *IMMEDIATELY.*

Wolf Moon

Dear Wolf,

Saul assures me that your check is probably in the mail by this time.

The obit on "Gilmer C. Merton" was interesting, but didn't you have to give the paper some disinformation to get it printed? I hope you haven't got yourself into trouble.

The ten o'clock news last night carried about a minute and a half on the mysterious goings-on around No. Velo City. Have you thought of looking into them? They would seem to be right up your alley, and it is entirely possible you might get a nonfiction book out of them as well as a new novel. (But that poor guy from the electric company — ugh!)

Since your name is now legally Wolf Moon, it would be well for us to execute a new agency agreement. I enclose it. All terms as before.

Very fondly,
Gm
Georgia

Dear Georgia,

I was sorry to hear of the unfortunate accident that befell Mr. Hearwell's wife and children. Please extend my sympathy.

While you're doing it, you might

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also mention my check, which has yet to arrive. If you could contrive to drop the words "disembodied claws" into your conversation, I believe you might find they work wonders.

Now a very small matter, Georgia — a whim of mine, if you will. (We writers are entitled to an occasional whim, after all, and as soon as you have complied with this one of mine I will Air Express you the ms. of my latest, THE SHRIEKING IN THE NURSERY.) I have found that I work best when *everything* surrounding a new book corresponds to the mood. I am returning all four copies of our new letter of agreement. Can I, dear Georgia, persuade you to send me a fresh set signed in your blood?

Very sincerely,

Wolf

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Richard Mueller wrote "Welcome to Coventry," (March 1983). His latest story is about a nuclear reactor on the campus of U. C. L. A., a situation which he says exists right now.

Cenotaph

BY

RICHARD MUELLER

No. 1. *Cenotaph*, by Robert Deville. Granite and black marble. The sculptor, a survivor of the Bruin Disaster, created the piece to memorialize his wife, who died as a result of the accident. Deville donated *Cenotaph* to the park, and it was decided that this piece, above all, captured the nature and depth of the tragedy. A short time later, Deville disappeared.

Akira

The statue always draws me on those mornings that follow the tossing and turning sessions, when memory has robbed me of sleep and I awake to wonder how long I have. I can see the park from my window, always lit, fully open and still. In the distance beyond are the hospitals, rank on rank of them risen from the demolition, waiting to receive us each one as our time comes round. I sit then, listening to the collapse and rebirth of the tiny cells in my temples, and I can see the *Cenotaph*.

It is fully twelve feet in height, massive, striking, and all the more amazing for the short time of its construction. Somewhat under four months, but how far under, how madly he must have driven himself, hidden away in the mountains, working around the clock, racing the poison he knew was killing Marie. When I see the *Cenotaph*, its angles, planes, curves, and textures, I always see them: one dead, one gone.

In design it resembles nothing so much as a Sheila-na-gig, one of those strange pre-Christian Irish statuettes. A fetish or goddess-figure. A sitting woman, leaning backward, feet together, legs bowed outward, no breasts, enlarged genitalia, head thrown back, expression of madness or pain, masturbat-

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ing with one hand. The *Cenotaph* is too similar to be coincidence, but, as well as I knew Bob and Marie Deville, I have no idea as to why that pose, for it is Marie. It is not exactly the same (the scholars have pointed this out), for the hand does not touch the vagina, but is curled outward in a gesture of repose. The upturned face is not pained but questioning and infinitely sad. The judgment passed is not fair. She does not understand.

The guards are used to seeing me in the early morning hours and neither help nor hinder my passing, from the *Cenotaph* to the Monument, along the Path of Ten Thousand Stones. Sometimes I see another wanderer, always at a distance, a tall man in a duffle coat. Sometimes I pull out my handkerchief and wipe the moisture off that cool black stone. Sometimes I wait until the sun begins to burn out the blackness above the Los Angeles skyline, but usually I return to my room before the dark folds in upon itself. Those days I sleep late and come out in the afternoon with sunglasses on.

Bob

The gray day after the 1980 election. Like most campus blacks, I was wearing an overcoat of despair and uncertainty that morning. I had almost decided to cut morning calculus when I see this tall, bearded guy on the steps of Math/Physics trying to get people to sign a petition. The morning after the Reichstag Fire and of course nobody's buying, so I try to pass by, too, and he hooks my arm.

Now I was a bit too young to have been to the 'Nam or anything like that, but I've always been touchy about being grabbed. I guess you can take the black out of the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto out of the black. So I spin around and step in on him, heavy and hard.

"You could lose a hand puttin' it on me, bro."

He looks at me as if he never saw a honked-off black man before and blinks, leaning too far forward and opening his mouth. He's too much. I start laughing.

"Hey, pal, I'm sorry, I didn't mean...."

"No, man," I say, shaking my head. "I'm laughing at myself. I must be some kind of asshole coming on with a line like that. It's not like me. I'm just ... upset, you know?"

He let out an audible sigh of relief. "Me, too."

"You vote for Carter or Anderson?"

"Commoner."

I liken as I've never heard of him, and he says that hardly anyone has, but maybe next election, and he hands me a flyer.

"If you have classes in this building, you might want to read this." I thank him, wondering what the 1984 presidential campaign has to do with the Math/Physics Building, and hurry off to class. The flyer goes forgotten into the back of my calc book. (People have

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asked me why I always seem to shift into the present tense when I tell that story. I don't know for sure, but I think it's something to do with an unwillingness to let that memory go.)

Maire

A weeknight later, chewing through L'Hospital's Rule. the radio on to one of those call-in programs, I heard a familiar voice. The speaker claimed that there was a nuclear reactor right on campus, that it was flammable, unshielded, unsafe, and furthermore, the damned thing was located in Bolter Hall. His name was Bob Deville and he said there would be a meeting. It had to be the Grabber. I dug out the flyer and what I read there scared me, not that I'd given much thought to the Nuke question before, but Christ, Bolter Hall was fifty yards from Math/Physics. I could see it from the window of calc class.

The meeting was in an old Bekins warehouse in Westwood. I took the freight elevator up to a whitewashed loft/studio/apartment smelling of linseed oil, coffee, and stone. Muted Charlie Parker and the tick of a chisel on granite masked my entrance as the door rolled back.

Iron beams, reinforced floor, heavy stone megaliths in various states of completion, paintings on the walls. Bob Deville, looking much as I had first seen him, stood on a section of log, carving away at a great stone menhir with cheerful deliberation, chipping loose anything that did not meet with his vision. Standing below him, leaning against the stone, with coffee in one hand and a cigarette in the other, was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen.

(Now, I am an adult, reasonably well adjusted, happy, not self-destructive. It was evident to me by the situation, by the body language and attitude, that this was Bob Deville's woman, if not his wife. And I never considered myself susceptible to love at first sight. In fact, I had not, until this moment, considered that such a thing existed, but now I was caught up in it. Like a snake-charmed rabbit, I froze, waiting to be noticed, watching them. She was exquisite: brown hair, dark eyes, a soft round Irish face, and a compact body. A dancer's body. I have always been a sucker for a dancer's body.)

"Hello?" I realized that I was staring at her. I introduced myself. She brought me coffee and small talk, her voice rich with brogue, as Bob finished his carving and washed up in his workman's sink. Deville was an established sculptor, Marie a painter. They'd met in Ireland six years ago. She was forty-six, he was thirty-six. They both looked twenty-eight. I was twenty-six and was feeling eighteen.

Other people arrived: professors, students, community types, over thirty of them. Bob and a doctor named Ruffold outlined the problem. A research reactor almost twenty years old. Graphite rods, uranium metal instead of ore, just begging for a fire like the one

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that destroyed the English Windsail in the fifties. It had burned for over a week, the clouds scattering over miles of farmland. Millions of gallons of contaminated milk had stained the Irish Sea for weeks afterward.

"They use 93 percent enriched uranium. That's bomb grade."

"The stack's too short. The exhaust gases drift across the upper floors of Math/Physics on a prevailing wind. On a backwind, right into the Student Union."

"Last year they shipped their waste to the Idaho reprocessing plant on a flatbed truck. The driver picked up his girl friend, spent two days in Vegas, and took a week to reach Idaho. The truckbed was so radioactive that it had to be buried."

"They let high school students use that thing."

"The next room's a snack bar."

Ruffold summed up. "O.K, we've got a lot of good evidence, but it's not going to be easy. You know who just got elected and he likes those things, so we'll need to get petitions signed, financial support, legal aid, editorials, the works. It's not going to be easy and it may take a while, but we'll do it. Thank you for coming, and I'll see you in two weeks at my place."

"Jonathan?" I looked up. The loft was almost empty. Her voice was heavy with concern. "Are you all right?"

"I guess so. I never dreamed...."

"It is a shock when you find out. Like some more coffee?"

"How about a beer?" Bob called, going to the fridge. I nodded. We stayed up talking very late that night. I wandered home in the moonlight, full of problems.

Akira

"Bob, I'm in love with your wife." Of course, I never said it. I didn't have to. And it never made a difference to our friendship. We became a local quartet: Bob, Marie, myself, and whatever girl I was going with, fill in the blank. And some of them were, or maybe they just suffered in comparison with Marie.

We were always together. I infected Bob with my love of history. Marie began to teach me painting and hooked me on Irish music. And we fought the Bruin.

It hung always over us like a cloud, the future wrapped in fire. We spread the word. Some people moved away, but most preferred to ignore the dragon or, like us, attempted to kill it. It gave to life a certain immediacy.

Henelopen

Tony and Salo and I, full of cheap drink and the devil, caught the stranger on the street where it runs under the freeway. A block of closed stores and very dark and we misjudged his size, but we were three. Piss and brimstone and vinegar.

"Hey, whitey, where you think you goin'?"

The man ignored us, not a head-down, go-away ignore but genuine non-

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existence. Salo punched my arm. "Man, don't let him put you down like that."

Salo, you dumb prick, you do it, but I couldn't say that. I was the leader. I had stolen the wine. I bounded after the big man on rubber feet and grabbed his arm. Something took me by the wrist, hard.

"You want something, son?"

His voice was calm, deep, soft, spooky. This wasn't going well. He was supposed to be afraid of me. He looked me over, his face bright in a stray shard of moonlight dropping through the gap between two overhangs. Or maybe his face glowed. I desperately wanted him to let me go and he did.

I stumbled back into Tony. "Hey man, he hurt you?" Tony hissed.

"Shut up, fool."

"Did you want something from me, son?"

"Don't call me 'son.' I ain't you son," I snapped. Tony and Salo each took a step away from me.

"All right, I won't. What's your name?"

No way. "J-Jonathan Akira."

"What did you want from me, Jonathan Akira?"

"I wanted to know why you ignored me, man," I growled, feeling better. No whitey was going to ignore me, not a chance.

"I didn't ignore you. I overlooked you. There wasn't enough to notice." He raised his hand, gestured. "You two get lost. Come here, Akira."

I could hear Tony and Salo running. I stumbled forward, scared again, hating myself.

"I didn't notice you because there was nothing to notice. You're nothing, Akira. I bet that isn't even your real name, is it?"

"N-no."

"What's your given name?"

"John Washington."

He laughed, but there was neither menace nor mocking in it. "Jonathan Akira is better. Keep it, all the days of your short life, because that's all you've got coming."

I turned to run and he had me by the shoulder. "I'm not going to hurt you. You'll do it. And that's a shame, because you're smart and that doesn't have to happen to you. You want that to happen to you?"

"No," I answered, and meant it.

"Good. Then you go and make something of your life. One year from tonight I'll be walking down this street, and you come up to me and tell me how you've done. I'd like to know." He released me. "Take care, Akira." He walked away.

"Wait, uh, hey." He stopped. "What's your name, man?"

Marie

"Henelopen?"

"That's what he said." We were sitting in the back booth of an overpriced coffee shop in Westwood, waiting for Bob and Pete Ruffold. "I looked the name up."

"It sounds French."

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"I think you're right. Anyway, it's the name of a cape on the coast of Delaware. It's distinguished by giant dunes that migrate along the shoreline. They've been moving ever since people stopped to notice."

"Sounds like a metaphor. Did you see him a year later?"

I laughed. "Nope. I went back. In that year I'd brought up my grades, gotten a scholarship acceptance to U.C.L.A., become a regular citizen. I went back to the same place, but he never showed up. I guess he migrated on down the coast with the other dunes."

We made small talk to keep our minds off the issue. Bob, Pete Ruffold, Cheryl Tank, and some of the Resistance Committee had met with the NRC rep to protest the university's decision to keep the reactor operating. Frontal politics, yelling sessions across smoky tables, were not my thing. Bob and Pete were optimistic. I wasn't so sure.

The door crashed open and they descended like Valkyries on our table.

"Twenty minutes!"

"They call us alarmists."

Ruffold leaned over the table, a big, lanky man with buck teeth. "NRC's approved an extension of Bruin's licence for ten years, with an option to extend it to twenty. They say that the reactor's safe because it has a new backup system."

"What?"

Bob slumped into a seat beside Marie and nodded. "The Argon bypass system the school was yacking about."

"Now wait. That stuff arrived eight months ago. The components are still crated."

"Morrison, the NRC rep, says he's 'confident that the system will be speedily installed,' " Pat Owen said. "Move over, Akira, let a woman sit down." She slid into the booth, short and slim with masses of thick black hair and energy. Pat was scheduled to fly to Sacramento the next morning for an audience with the governor.

"Look, we've lost a battle but we can still fight. Six professors have refused to hold classes in Math/Physics. We've got over eight thousand signatures. I'll talk to Brown tomorrow. He's been sympathetic in the past. Come on, Akira, walk a lady lawyer home."

Pat

"You're really sweet, Akira. Like to fly to Sacramento with me in the morning?"

"Sorry, but I promised Marie I'd drive her down to Long Beach to meet Bob."

"Already got a date, heh? Rain check?"

"Anytime."

"Mmmm, good. We better get some sleep, then."

Akira

Pat left at ten, I left at twelve, reflecting that another cycle was coming around. She was gentle, with a life that

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was totally her own. No problems. With any luck it wouldn't be a one-night stand and it would take me away from my problem for a while.

I was to pick Marie up at the doctor's at two, then meet Bob and catch an early show at the Fox Venice. *Breaker Morant* and *Days of Heaven.* She hadn't yet told Bob about the doctor because forty-six is very old for a pregnancy and she wasn't yet sure. I was her confidant. It was like something out of a Restoration comedy, but, as long as Marie didn't know of my real feelings, I was satisfied. Things could go along as they were. There would always be a Pat to smooth things over.

I pulled onto the campus and parked behind Bolter Hall. The doctor's was four blocks away. It was fair and cool, so I decided to walk it.

I can tell you the name of or physically describe everyone I passed on that walk, every step, each sight. When the reactor blew I was no more than fifty yards from it.

There had been a high school science class from Riverside in the building. I can remember the bus parked in a loading zone by Math/Physics. There were survivors, for at least a while, and from them they pieced together the story. A control rod had broken during its manipulation by a sixteen-year-old physics whiz from Orange County. Nuclear surges move faster than thought can sort them out, and a tongue of force smashed the student through the ceiling, studding the overhead with graphite rods. Six other students, their teacher, and two grad students were decapitated by flying equipment. A student and teacher in the hall felt the concussion and saw the wall bow outward before it collapsed on them. They died within a few days. Of twenty-four other people in the building, five escaped alive, two of them unhurt outside of lethal doses of radiation. As the stack collapsed and the windows blew out, a greasy plume of poison towered in the air.

I remember that the moment the accident happened, I was thinking that the wind was coming in from the northwest, upwind of the Bruin, myself, and Marie. I ran. Around me, others were running or standing open-mouthed. One man later swore that he saw the smoke form the shape of a skull. I saw the bus driver running toward the building and barreled past him.

The doctor's was on the third floor of the second block, and I crashed past the nurse into the examining room. Marie was wearing only a robe and was sitting on the examining table. The doctor, a short man in glasses, turned angrily at my entrance, probably thinking I was some crazed addict looking for drugs.

"Jonathan?"

"The Bruin's blown," I panted. I scooped up her clothes. "C'mon!"

"What's this about?" the doctor cried.

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"The reactor. Your car, where is it?"

"I parked on campus."

"You can't go that way now."

Somehow Marie got dressed and we made it down to the street, while the doctor rushed about to warn the other people in the building. We never saw him again.

On the street, people were standing, staring at the huge plume of smoke and dust arcing above the campus and beginning to tend on the wind. A red Fiat sedan was pulling away from the curb, and I jumped in front of it.

"Are you crazy?"

"Ten bucks if you take us out of here."

The driver, a little Chicano named Joe Piña, was in my sociology class. "Hey, I know you. Sure, c'mon."

"Marie!"

"We've got to warn them."

"There isn't time."

We tore down Santa Monica Boulevard with the windows up. When we told Piña what had happened, he went pale and cut his speed just enough to make sure we weren't stopped for speeding. Behind us the sky darkened as fire engines passed us going the other way. When we reached Vermont Avenue, I had him pull over.

"What's up?"

"I'm going to call Marie's husband and warn him off." Marie was sitting in the back of the Fiat, her face ashen, her eyes on the rear window. The day had been clear and the fallout lay like a spreading brown finger over the city.

"Bob?"

"Hi, Jon. What's up?"

I told him in as few words as possible. He was silent until I told him that Marie was with me and that we were at least momentarily out of the danger area.

"You want us to meet you in Long Beach?"

"No, the wind'll bring it here soon enough. Head out to Altadena, to Pete Ruffold's place. I'll call his wife and let him know. When you get there, shower down. I'm on the way. And Jon, thanks."

Pat

Stone No. 47 is the bus driver.

Stone No. 1341 is the doctor.

Stones 6512 and 9175 belong to old girl friends.

We watched them plant Stone No. 10650 today. Joe Piña. Apparently he inhaled something before we got the windows up, because he died of cancer of the pharynx with complications. We turned away.

" 'Another poor boy's dead and gone,' as the song goes." Pat took my arm.

"You've got a morbid sense of humor."

"It's necessary to survive here, babe."

"Then come with me to Washington."

I shook my head. "If I come with you to Washington, I can't get the kind

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of treatment I can get here at Bradley."

"If you had come with me to Sacramento, we wouldn't have this problem."

True. But it's my problem, not ours. "Besides, it's still not cool for a white member of a Senate investigating committee to have a black boy friend. Not even a hotshot like you, not in these times. I'm not about to jeopardize your career."

"Bullshit," she muttered, but we both knew I was right. "I'll see you whenever I can get back. That'll be often, you know."

"I know."

We walked out past the *Cenotaph*. The judgment has not been fair. She does not understand.

Marie

A knock on my door in the middle of the night. "What are you doing here?"

She's dressed for travel, belted and bundled up, and I know something is very wrong. "I'm going away tonight. May I have some tea?"

Numbly, I make tea and bring in two cups. She's sitting on the couch, looking very pale, scared, cold. I sit down beside her and she puts her head on my shoulder.

"The test was positive. No, don't talk, let me finish. I've got ovarian cancer, and sufficiently advanced to make it quick. Six months, no more. It's already taken my daughter."

All I can manage is a nod. She took my hand. "Bob and I are leaving for the Sierras, tonight, in less than an hour. I wanted to see you before I left because I probably won't see you again, and I wanted to tell you that I understand."

"Understand?"

"I understand how you feel, about me, about everything. And I'm grateful." We sat there for a long time, side by side, sipping our tea, saying nothing, running out our time. When we parted at the door, she kissed me quickly on the lips, touched my cheek and was gone.

(The next morning I found a small cardboard box on my bookcase. It contained a Sheila-na-gig, a tiny statue that Marie had brought with her from Ireland, that I had seen at the loft and admired. There was no card.)

Akira

There are curves, angles of the *Cenotaph* which, when seen in the moonlight, play tricks on you. Tricks of movement. Tricks of depth. At times it seems to breathe, to be alive in the night, as if it is waiting for someone, or something. I feel closest then to Marie.

We watched the crane unload the great figure, the park's groundsmen steadying it over its base, a flat plate of marble.

"It's incredible."

"It took all I had and all Marie had, but it was a joint decision. She wanted it as much as I did. More. It's hard to realize that she's gone."

"I'm sorry."

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He looked at me. "Her last words were for you. She said, 'Tell Jon, I'm sorry.' "

With a click, the Cenotaph *touched down on its block.*

"Hello." The tall man in the duffle coat, looking down at me. It all made so much sense now. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

"Henelopen."

"Yes."

"If you've come to check up on me, you're about ten years too late." He looked older, his forehead creased with worry lines.

"You were right."

"About?"

"About it's being a short life."

"I'm sorry about that. I wasn't here then."

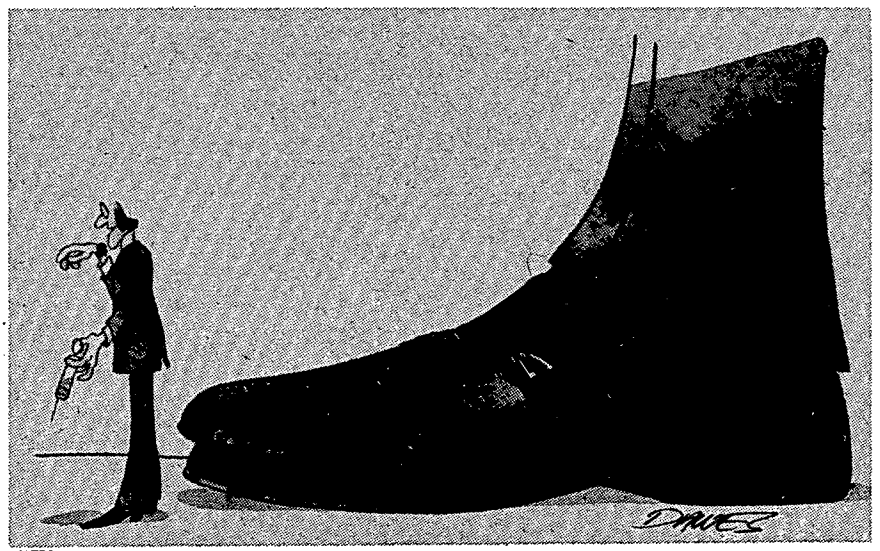
"I know," I said smiling, then laughed. You were on down the coast with the other dunes. I could have been in Sacramento. Marie might not have been at the doctor's. There might be no *Cenotaph* ... They set up the fifteen-thousandth stone today. It was no one I knew."

He stood, staring at me, but I was looking at the *Cenotaph*. I, too, understand, Marie. I do now. I unlocked the wheels.

"Can I give you a hand?"

"No," I said. "I manage pretty well, considering." I rolled off, heading for home. The sky was just beginning to lighten about L.A.

For Marie Hanley and Tony DeJohnette



"There — you see, Wilkens? A full minute since the injection and absolutely no side effects."

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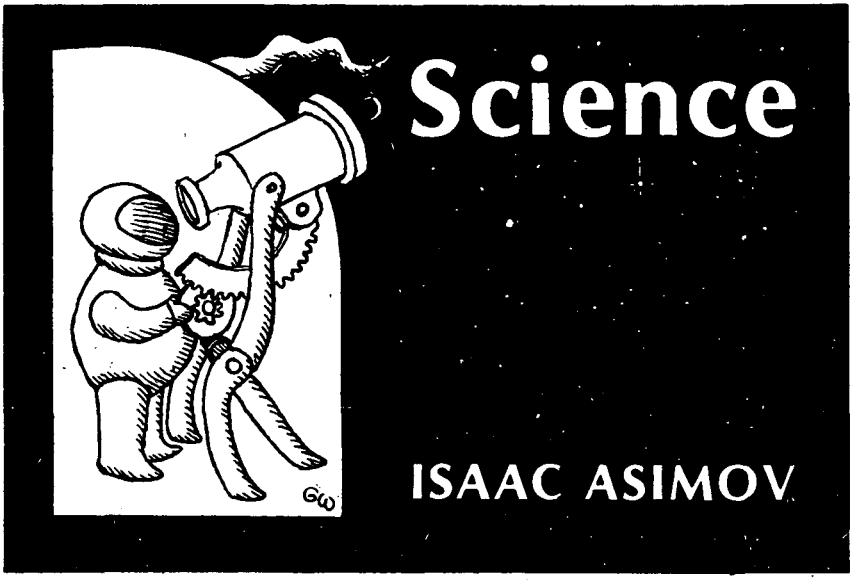

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE PROPERTIES OF CHAOS

Back in 1967, I wrote a book on photosynthesis, and it's just possible that some of you may interrupt me at this moment to ask me what the devil photosynthesis might be. If so, have faith! I will explain before the essay is over.

I recognized the fact, at the time, that the five-syllable word was not one to inspire love and confidence at first sight, and it was my intention to give the book some dynamic title that would grab the reader's attention and get him to buy the book before quite realizing that it was full of moderately difficult biochemistry.

I didn't have the exact title in mind, so, for a working title, I let my imagination take a well earned rest, and used "Photosynthesis." By the time I had finished, I still did not have the exact title in mind, and so I thought I would let the publisher, Arthur Rosenthal of Basic Books, worry about it.

In 1968, the book was published, and I received an advance copy and found, somewhat to my distress, that the title on the book jacket was *Photosynthesis.* In fact, believe it or not, that title was used *four times.*

I said, tremulously, "Arthur, how do you expect to sell a book with the ti-

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tle *Photosynthesis — Photosynthesis — Photosynthesis — Photosynthesis?*"

And he said, "But haven't you noticed what else there is on the book jacket?"

"What?" said I, puzzled.

He pointed to the bottom right corner of the jacket where it said, clearly, *Isaac Asimov.*

As some of you may know, flattery always works with me, and so I went off grinning, and, at that, the book did reasonably well. The publisher did not lose money on it, but I'll be frank with you. It was *not* a runaway best-seller.

So it has occurred to me to deal with some aspects of the subject once again in the lovably informal style I use in these essays, and this time I will use a dramatic title, though I suppose that that alone will not make this issue of F & SF a runaway best-seller either.

Let us start with the matter of eating. Animals, from the smallest worms to the largest whale, cannot live without food, and the food is, in essence, plants. All of us, from quadrillions of insects to billions of human beings, chomp away endlessly and remorselessly at the plant world, or at animals that have eaten plants, or at animals that have eaten animals that have eaten plants, or at—

Trace back the food chains of animals and, at their ends, you will always find plants.

Yet the plant world does not diminish. Plants continue to grow as endlessly and as remorselessly as they are eaten, but as nearly as we can make out by simple non-scientific observation, they themselves do not eat. To be sure they require water, and sometimes they have to be helped along by carefully larding the soil with something like animal excrement — but we hesitate to consider that "eating."

In pre-scientific times, it seemed to make sense to suppose that plants were an order of objects that were totally different from animals. Of course, plants grew as animals did, and were produced from seeds as some animals were produced from eggs, but these seemed comparatively superficial likenesses.

Animals moved independently, breathed, and ate. Plants did none of these things, any more than rocks did. Independent motion, in particular, seemed an essential property of life, so that whereas all animals were self-evidently alive, plants (like rocks) were not.

This would seem to be the view of the Bible. When the dry land ap-

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peared on the third day of the Genesis account of creation, God is described as saying, "Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit." (Genesis I:11).

No mention is made of life being characteristic of the plant world.

It is not until the fifth day that life is mentioned. Then God says, "Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life ... And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth..." (Genesis I:20-21).

Animals are characterized as moving and alive; the two apparently implying each other. Plants are neither.

God says: "...to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat..." (Genesis I-30). In other words, the moving animals are alive and the non-moving plants are merely food supplied them by the grace of God.

Herbivorousness is clearly considered the ideal. Carnivorousness is not mentioned in the Bible until after the Flood, when God tells Noah and his sons, "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you; even as the green herb have I given you all things." (Genesis 9:3).

In general, western thought followed the words of the Bible (as it could not help but do, since the Bible was considered the inspired word of God). The non-living, non-nourishing ground was somehow converted into non-living, but nourishing, plants which could serve as food for living animals. The seed, when sown, served as a triggering agent for the ground-to-plant conversion.

The first person to test this theory of plant growth was a Flemish physician, Jan Baptista van Helmont (1580-1644). He planted a young willow tree, weighing five pounds, in a pot containing 200 pounds of earth. For five years, he let the willow tree grow, watering it regularly, and covering the earth carefully between waterings so that no extraneous matter could fall into it and confuse the results.

After five years, he withdrew the now much larger willow tree from the pot, and carefully knocked off all the earth adhering to the roots. The willow tree weighed 169 pounds, having gained 164 pounds. The earth had lost, at most, 1/8 of 1 pound.

This was the first quantitative biochemical experiment we know of and was of crucial importance for that, if for nothing else. In addition, it showed conclusively that earth did not convert itself, to any but the tiniest degree, into plant tissue.

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Van Helmont reasoned that since the only other material that entered the system was water, the willow tree (and, presumably, plants generally) were formed out of water.

The reasoning seemed iron-bound, especially since it was well known from earliest times that plants simply would not grow if they were deprived of water.

And yet the reasoning was wrong, because water was *not* the only material other than earth that touched the willow tree. The tree was also touched by air, and van Helmont would instantly have acknowledged the fact if it had been pointed out to him. It was just that air, being invisible, impalpable, and, apparently, immaterial, was always easy to ignore. Van Helmont had other reasons to do so, too.

In van Helmont's time, air and related substances were beginning to be studied scientifically for the first time. Indeed, it was van Helmont himself who initiated the process.

Thus, earlier chemical experimenters had noticed, and reported, vapors that formed in their mixtures and came bubbling upward, but dismissed them as varieties of air.

Van Helmont was the first to study these "airs" and to note that they sometimes had properties quite distinct from that of ordinary air. Some of the vapors were, for instance, inflammable, which ordinary air certainly was not. Van Helmont noted that when such inflammable vapors burned, droplets of water sometimes formed.

Nowadays, of course, we know that when hydrogen burns, it forms water, and we can be pretty sure that that was what van Helmont observed. Van Helmont, without the advantage of our hindsight, came to the rather simpler conclusion that such an inflammable vapor (and, therefore, all vapors, even including ordinary air itself) was a form of water. Therefore, he naturally dismissed air as the source of the willow tree's substance. It was water that was the source, whether in liquid or in vaporous form.

Van Helmont noted that liquid water had a definite volume, whereas vapors did not. Vapors expanded to fill spaces, interpenetrating everything. They seemed to lack order, to be substances that were in total disorder.

The Greeks believed that the Universe began as a kind of substance that was in total disorder. The Greek term for this original, disorderly substance was "Chaos." Van Helmont called his vapors by this term, using his own Flemish pronunciation, which, when spelled phonetically, produced the word "gas." To this day, we call air a gas, and we apply the word to any vapor or air-like substance.

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Van Helmont studied the properties of chaos, that is, the properties of gases. He produced a gas from burning wood that was not inflammable and that tended to dissolve in water (something that van Helmont would naturally interpret as being converted into water.) He called it "gas sylvestre" ("gas from wood"), and it is the gas we know today as carbon dioxide. It is a pity van Helmont had no way of knowing the significance of the discovery in connection with his investigation of the problem of plant growth.

The study of gases took another leap forward when an English botanist, Stephan Hales (1677-1761), learned how to collect them with reasonable efficiency. (Some of the material that follows, by the way, was covered in "Slow Burn," F & SF, October 1962, but from a somewhat different angle.)

Instead of simply allowing them to escape into the air and thus being forced to study them on the fly, so to speak, he produced his gases in a reaction vessel that had a long neck that curled downward and upward again. This long neck could be inserted into a trough of water, and the opening of the neck could be covered by an inverted beaker also full of water.

When a particular gas formed as a result of the chemical changes taking place in the reaction vessel, it bubbled to the surface of the reacting materials, filled the air space above, expanded through the long, curved neck and into the inverted beaker. The gas collected in the beaker stayed put, and the properties of one particular chaos could be studied at leisure.

Hales prepared and studied, in this fashion, a number of gases, including those we now call hydrogen, sulfur dioxide, methane, carbon monoxide, and carbon dioxide. He didn't get enough out of it, however, for he persisted in thinking of them all as varieties of ordinary air.

It was impossible to work with these gases, however, without eventually coming to the conclusion that air was not a simple substance but was a mixture of different gases.

A Scottish chemist, Joseph Black (1728-1799), was interested in carbon dioxide and found, in 1756, that if it were brought into contact with the common solid substance called lime (calcium oxide is its chemical name), it would be converted into limestone (calcium carbonate).

He then took note of a crucial fact. He didn't have to use laboriously prepared carbon dioxide for the purpose. He merely had to leave lime in contact with ordinary air. The limestone would form spontaneously, although much more slowly than if he used carbon dioxide. Black's conclusion was that air contained carbon dioxide in small quantities, and in that conclusion, he was completely correct.

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In 1722, another Scottish chemist, Daniel Rutherford (1749-1819), a student of Black's, allowed candles to burn in a closed container of air. Eventually, the candle would no longer burn, and what's more neither would anything else burn in that air. Nor would a mouse live.

By this time, it was known that a burning candle produced carbon dioxide, so it was an easy conclusion that all the normal air that would allow burning had been replaced by carbon dioxide, which was known not to allow burning.

On the other hand, it was also known that carbon dioxide would be absorbed by certain chemicals (such as lime). The air in which the candle had burned was passed through these chemicals and, indeed, carbon dioxide was removed. Nevertheless, most of the air remained untouched, and what was left, though not carbon dioxide, would not support combustion. What Rutherford had isolated was the gas we now call "nitrogen."

An English chemist, Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), also studied gases. He studied the gas that was produced by fermenting grain (he lived next door to a brewery) and found that it was carbon dioxide. He studied its properties, in particular the manner in which it dissolved in water, and discovered that a solution of carbon dioxide produced what he considered (but I do not) a pleasant, tart drink.

(When I was young, such carbonated water was called "seltzer" and could be bought for a penny a glass. Nowadays, it is called "Perrier" and can be bought, I believe, for a dollar a glass. I refused, in my youth, to invest a penny in the sour drink, and I doubly refuse to invest a dollar today).

Priestley was the first to lead gases through mercury rather than water and was thus able to collect some gases which would have dissolved instantly in water, if he were using Hales's method. In this way, Priestley isolated and studied such gases as hydrogen chloride and ammonia.

His most important discovery came in 1774. When mercury is strongly heated in air, a brick-red powder forms on its surface. This is the result of mercury combining (with some difficulty) with a portion of the air. If the brick-red powder is collected and heated again, the mercury-air combination is broken up and the air component is liberated as a gas.

Priestley discovered that this air component supported combustion with great ease. A smoldering splint burst into active flame if placed in a beaker containing this gas. Mice penned up in a container of it behaved in an unusually frisky manner, and when Priestley breathed some of it, it made him feel "light and easy." It is the gas we now call "oxygen."

It was the French chemist Antoine Laurent Lavoisier (1743-1794), by

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common consent the greatest chemist who ever lived, who made sense of this. His careful experiments showed him by 1775 that air consisted of a mixture of two gases, nitrogen and oxygen, in an approximately 4 to 1 ratio by volume. (We know now that there are a number of minor constituents in dry air, making up about 1 percent of the whole, and that included among them is 0.03 percent carbon dioxide.)

Lavoisier showed that combustion is the result of the chemical combination of substances with the oxygen of the air. For instance, the burning of coal, which is almost pure carbon, is the result of combination with oxygen to form carbon dioxide. When hydrogen burns, it combines with oxygen to form water, which thus consists of a chemical combination of these two gases.

Lavoisier correctly suggested that the food we ate and the air we breathed combined with each other, so that respiration was a form of slow combustion. This would mean that human beings inhaled air that was comparatively rich in oxygen, but exhaled air that was comparatively depleted in that gas and enriched in carbon dioxide. Careful chemical analysis of exhaled air showed this to be true.

There was now a satisfactory explanation for the fact that a candle, burning in a closed container of air, eventually stopped burning; that a mouse living in such a chamber eventually died; and that the remaining air in either chamber would not support the burning of any other candle or the breathing of any other mouse.

What happened was that either burning or respiration gradually consumed the oxygen content of air and replaced it with carbon dioxide, leaving the nitrogen unchanged. Air made up of a mixture of nitrogen and carbon dioxide could support neither combustion nor respiration.

That brought up an interesting problem. Every animal living is constantly respiring, constantly inhaling air which is 21 percent oxygen, and constantly exhaling air which is only 16 percent oxygen. Surely, there would come a time when the oxygen content of Earth's atmosphere as a whole would be depleted to the point where life would become impossible.

This should have happened in less time than is included in the known history of civilization, and so we can only conclude that something is replacing the oxygen as fast as it is used up. But what is the something?

The first hint of an answer to the problem came from Priestley even before he had discovered oxygen.

Priestley had penned up a mouse in a closed container of air, and even-

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tually the mouse died. The air as it then existed would not support the life of any other animal, and Priestley wondered if it would also kill plants. If it did, that would show that plants, too, were a form of life, which would be an interesting, though un-Biblical, conclusion. (The un-Biblicality of it would not have bothered Priestley, who was a Unitarian and, therefore, a religious radical — and a social radical as well, by the way.)

In 1771, Priestley put a sprig of mint into a glass of water and put it into a container of air in which a mouse had lived and died. The plant did not die. It grew there for months and seemed to flourish. What was more, at the end of that time, a mouse could be placed in the enclosed air and it would live for a considerable while; and a candle placed in it would continue to burn some time.

In short, the plant had seemed to revitalize the air which the animal had depleted.

In modern terms, we would say that whereas animals consumed oxygen, plants produced it. The combination of the two processes left the overall percentage of oxygen in the atmosphere unchanged.

Plants thus perform the double service of supplying animal life with an endless supply of oxygen as well as food, so that although animals (including you and I) breathe and eat constantly, there is always more oxygen and food in existence to breathe and eat.

Once Lavoisier explained combustion and put chemistry on its modern foundations, the matter of plant activity roused particular interest.

A Dutch botanist, Jan Ingenhousz (1730-1799), heard of Priestley's experiment and decided to go more deeply into the matter. In 1779, he performed many experiments designed to study the manner in which plants revitalized used up air and discovered that plants produced their oxygen only in the presence of light. They did so by day, but not by night.

In 1782, a Swiss botanist, Jean Senebier (1742-1809), confirmed Ingenhousz's findings and went further. He showed that something else was necessary for the production of oxygen by plants; they had to be exposed to carbon dioxide.

The time was now ripe to repeat van Helmont's experiment of a century and a half before, in the light of new knowledge. This was done by another Swiss botanist, Nicolas Theodore de Saussure (1767-1845). He allowed plants to grow in a closed container with an atmosphere containing carbon dioxide and carefully measured how much carbon dioxide was used by the plant and how much weight of tissue it gained. The gain in tissue weight was considerably greater than the weight of carbon dioxide used up, and

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de Saussure showed quite convincingly that the only possible source of the remaining weight was water. Van Helmont had been partly right.

By now, enough was known to make it clear that plants were as alive as animals were and to get an idea of how the two great branches of life balanced each other.

Food, whether of plant or of animal tissue, is rich in carbon and hydrogen atoms, C and H. (The atomic theory was established in 1803 and was adopted by chemists rather rapidly.) When food was combined with oxygen, it formed carbon dioxide (CO_2) and water (H_2O).

The combination of substances containing carbon and hydrogen atoms with oxygen atoms generally liberates energy. The "chemical energy" of the carbon-hydrogen substances is converted in the body to kinetic energy, as when muscles contract, or into electrical energy, as when nerves conduct impulses, and so on. We might, therefore, write:

food + oxygen → carbon dioxide + water + kinetic, etc. energy.

With plants it is just the other way around:

light + carbon dioxide + water → food + oxygen.

What it amounts to is that plants and animals, working together, keep food and oxygen on one side and carbon dioxide and water on the other in balance, so that, on the whole, all four remain constant in amount, neither increasing nor decreasing.

The one irreversible change is the conversion of light energy into kinetic etc. energy. That has been going on for as long as life has existed and can continue on Earth as long as the Sun continues to radiate light in approximately the present fashion. This was first recognized and stated in 1845 by the German physicist Julius Robert Mayer (1814-1878).

How did this two-way balance come to evolve? We can speculate on the matter.

Originally, it was the ultraviolet light of the Sun that probably supplied the energy for building up relatively large molecules out of the small ones in the primordial sea's lifeless waters. (The conversion of small molecules to large ones usually involves an input of energy; the reverse usually involves an output of energy.)

Eventually, when molecules large and complex enough to possess the properties of life were formed, these could use (as food) molecules of intermediate molecules (complex enough to yield energy on breakdown, but not complex enough to be alive and capable of fighting back).

The Sun's energy, working on a hit-and-miss basis, only formed so

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much in the way of intermediate molecules, however, and these could support only so much life.

It paid living systems, therefore, to form membranes about themselves (becoming "cells") which could allow small molecules to pass inward. If the living systems possessed devices that would make use of solar energy for molecular build-up, those small molecules would be built up to large ones before they had a chance to get out again — and the large ones, once formed, could not get out either.

In this way, these cells (the prototypes of plants) would live in a microenvironment rich in food and would flourish to a far greater extent than pre-cellular life forms, which lacked the ability to direct food manufacture through the use of solar energy.

On the other hand, cells lacking the ability to use solar energy to make food could still flourish if they developed means to filch the food contents of cells that could. (These filchers were the prototypes of animals.)

And are these filchers parasites and nothing more?

Perhaps not. If plants existed alone, they would concentrate all available small molecules into their own tissues, and growth and development thereafter would be slow. Animals served to break down a reasonable proportion of the complex contents of plant cells and allow continued plant growth, development, and evolution, at a greater rate than would otherwise be possible.

Food molecules are far larger and more complex than the molecules of carbon dioxide and water. The two latter have molecules made up of three atoms each, whereas the characteristic molecules of food are made up of anywhere from a dozen to a million atoms.

Putting together large molecules from many small ones is called "synthesis" by chemists, from Greek words meaning "to put together." Whereas animals characteristically break down food molecules by combining them with oxygen to form carbon dioxide and water, plants characteristically "synthesize" food molecules out of carbon dioxide and water.

Plants do it by making use of the energy in light. Therefore, that particular kind of synthesis is called "photosynthesis," the prefix, "photo-" being from the Greek word for "light." Didn't I tell you I'd explain the word?

And there are a few more things I can say about it, too — next month.

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James Kelly's first story here since "The Fear that Men Call Courage," (September 1980) concerns a career woman who tries to pull her life together in the wake of a devastating accident. Mr. Kelly recently sold his first novel, titled PLANET OF WHISPERS.

The Cruelest Month

BY
JAMES PATRICK KELLY

Nell hated herself for keeping the appointment with Massinger. Even his waiting room had begun to grate on her. The shiny plants, the creaking wicker furniture, the grasscloth wall-covering; it was all too slick and insincere. Like Massinger. This was Stamford, not Montego Bay. The view out the window was of bespattered cars speeding along the Connecticut Turnpike; smudges of wet, black, late-season snow were melting in the breakdown lanes.

'The doctor will see you now, Ms. Cuneen."

As she entered his office Massinger bustled to greet her as if he had spent the day straightening his cuffs and waiting for her arrival. "Ah, Monday. And here's my favorite appointment." He grasped her hand with both of his. "How's life at the top, Nell?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Near the top, then."

"Otis, save your cheerleading for the football fans."

He laughed and steered her towards two leather chairs facing a floor-to-ceiling window. One was pushed slightly behind the other so that Nell would have to twist to see him. She sat next to a glass table set with goblets, a pitcher of ice water and a wicker basket filled with Kleenex.

"I sense a little extra hostility today, Nell. Am I wrong?" Nell could hear him flipping the pages of his notebook. "Shall we start with that?"

She crossed her legs and stared down at the traffic. Just a simple patient-therapist transaction: tell me your problems, dearie. Whom have you been sleeping with this week? She already decided not to bring the subject up unless he did.

"Serge agrees to the divorce," she

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said. "He says he doesn't want anything."

"How does that make you feel?"

"Relieved in a way. Sad, a little. I didn't want to leave it hanging." She poured herself some water and pushed the Kleenex out of reach. "I really wish he'd take what's his, though. He deserves something. It can't be easy for him to write and earn a living at the same time. In fact, I bet it's impossible. The guy couldn't even balance his checkbook before we were married. And he was just coming into his own when the ... the accident happened. Finding his voice, he called it. I don't want to feel responsible for making it harder for him to write."

"He left you, Nell. He's in charge of his life, you're in charge of yours."

"Sure. But his attitude annoys me. It's like he's saying, 'You made a mess of our lives, now clean it up. Leave me out.' " The ice clinked as she sipped from her goblet. "And there are boxes of mystery magazines in his closet. Alfred Hitchcock, Ellery Queen, Mike Shayne. His junk."

"Have a yard sale."

She grimaced. "All the neighborhood marriage coroners would love that. Sorting through the remains of our unholy wedlock. A nice way to spend a Saturday afternoon. I don't think so, Otis. I don't think I could stand to put Avril's toys out in the driveway and watch ... watch other people's kids take them away."

"You're not still carrying toys around the house, are you?"

She shook her head.

"It's time enough, Nell. Put all her things in her room, lock it and don't go in."

"No, I've got to get out of that house."

"Trouble sleeping?"

"I slept like a night watchman. These yellow pills you prescribed are terrific. Take two and suddenly television seems fascinating." She reached into her purse and tossed a brown plastic bottle onto the table. "I can't stop thinking, Otis. It's how I know I'm still alive."

"You'd prefer something milder?"

"I did have one dream about her. Last night. Not a nightmare. I dreamed I heard her laughing. I looked in her room but she wasn't there. I went to the window. There was a moon, footprints in the snow leading out to her swings. More laughing. I went out to the yard and followed her tracks. The swing was still jiggling — but no Avril. She called to me. 'Avril fool you, Mommy. April fool.' She was playing a game. I kept chasing her voice but I never caught up. She was laughing, I was laughing. I felt light, like I could jump over the house." Nell lapsed into silence.

Massinger cleared his throat. "This is a common dream scenario...."

"Don't tell me, Otis. Please. All I know is that for the first time in months I woke up feeling like a human being. I'd like to hold on to that."

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"All right, Nell. This is progress, you know. A nonthreatening dream about your daughter. I'm very pleased." Nell suspected that he was patronizing her. "How about your problem with the phones? Anything new there?"

"Worse." She took another drink. "Much worse. I finally got a speaker phone in my office and that's fine. I don't even have to touch a receiver, just talk into the little white box. I've ordered one for home and they're supposed to install it this week. But the other day I was in the conference room with Carruthers and some people from the paper products division and a call came through for me from an editor I'd been trying to reach for days. Jack Billingsly held the receiver out towards me and I ... and I panicked. I couldn't take it. I mumbled something about transferring the call to my secretary and I left. They were all gawking. God knows what they said while I was gone." She balled her fist as if to strike at the memory and then let it drop into her lap. "Damn, *damn!* This phone thing is hurting me with Carruthers. As if I didn't have problems already."

"There are more important things than your boss's opinion."

"Not in my life." She chuckled bitterly. "I've botched everything else; the job is the only thing left I'm proud of."

"You're good at self-pity, Nell. You're the only parent ever to lose a child. Yours is the first marriage to break up. Listen to me, Nell: the job is part of the problem. In order to make it at the office you had to harden yourself. The more success, the harder you got. You know what happened? You've gotten so hard that you're brittle."

"I'm not so hard, Otis. Just alone." She could see her own dim reflection in the window. "I'm thirty-eight years old and there's no one in my world except me."

"I'm part of your world."

For the first time she twisted around to see his expression. He was scribbling notes. "Thank you, Doctor," she said dryly. "Nice of you to say it."

The phone rang. He looked up at her, frowned and went over to the desk to answer it. "Yes? When? ... Oh, no.... Who's handling it? ... Yes, okay. Tell him I'll be there as soon as I can."

He approached her contritely. "I'm sorry, Nell, but something has come up. Another patient, an emergency." He squatted beside her chair so that their eyes were on a level. "Maybe we could pick it up again over dinner?" He rested his hand on her shoulder and then let it slide down her arm. "Say Thursday?"

She caught his hand. "Thursday is no good. I'm scheduled to sleep with Carruthers that night." He started — just the reaction she had wanted. For a few delicious seconds the adroit Dr. Otis Massinger was reduced to just another insecure male on the make. She laughed and kissed his hand. "April

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fool, Otis. Don't you ever look at your calendar?"

"I can't believe you said that, Nell." Already he was straightening the mask, wrapping himself in his professional dignity. "Even as a joke."

Nell often thought that if only he were a little less certain about the world and his place in it that there might be a future to their affair. As it was, all that he had to offer her were a series of elegant sensations: good food, fine wine, chamber music, mannered sex. "Thursday sounds about right, Otis." She stood abruptly and gazed down at the nickel-sized bald spot on the back of his head. "Your place?"

Nell flipped on the light in the foyer and sniffed. The house smelled of pine-scented Lysol. She hated coming home to nobody. Mondays, at least, were tolerable. Julieta, the cleaning woman, worked from ten to three and her presence always seemed to linger. Nell kicked off her shoes and wriggled her toes in the nap of the newly vacuumed carpet. She wished she were messy enough to keep a full-time maid busy. Maybe she should buy a cat.

She padded into the kitchen, popped a frozen chicken tetrazzini into the microwave and pulled a bottle of chardonnay from the refrigerator. She drank her first glass in two gulps and then peeled the price tag from the bottle. The second glass she sipped, savoring the balanced fruit, the hint of oak. She set her briefcase on the living room table and went upstairs to change.

When she saw the tricycle parked next to her bed she stiffened as if a current were crackling through her. She remained immobilized by this electric thrill of horror for some time, gaping and at the same time wanting desperately to look away. Mounted on the handle bars was a pink wicker basket. the plastic seat was covered with a strawberry design. Bits of gravel were wedged into the solid rubber tires and the green enamel was pitted and scratched from heavy use. A moan welled up from the back of her throat and became an inarticulate keen. When she could move again she slumped against the wall.

Her first lucid thought was that someone was playing a vicious prank. Julieta! She would call the bitch and fire her. The phone was at hand — but it seemed to mock her weakness. With a curse she swept it from the night-stand and fled down to the bar in the living room. She was trembling when she reached for the scotch; Cutty Sark splashed and beaded around her tumbler. She poured herself three fingers and choked it down neat.

The microwave buzzed and she nearly fell off the barstool. She flew into the kitchen, snapped off the timer and grabbed the bottle of wine. She built herself a nest of pillows on the modular couch and settled into it. Nell could not remember the last time she

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had seen Avril's tricycle. She had stopped carrying toys around the empty house weeks ago. Even then she had always remembered moving them when she had found them in strange places. Always. Yet no one else could have brought the tricycle from wherever it had been. Julieta was not a monster. If there had been thieves they would certainly have taken the televisions or the Betamax or the gold serving plate displayed on the living room hutch.

Slowly the alcohol eroded her fear into a boozy disquiet and then into a general and unfocused bewilderment. She drank the last of the chardonnay from the bottle.

"What you need, Nell old girl, is a shrink." She threw the empty onto the carpet and stretched out. Soon she was asleep. Before she went to work the next morning she carried the tricycle to the attic.

A pair of janitors were squeegeeing the stainless steel and glass entrance to the NoreasCorp Building. One of them opened a door and ogled Nell as she passed, as if she were some minor secretary instead of an assistant vice president. Nell scowled, remembering a crack Serge had made about her company. Lucier's Law, he had called it: the bigger the boss, the more doors you had to open to get to his office. Although Serge had taken a very sarcastic attitude towards her work, he had never hesitated to help her spend her paychecks.

Nell passed through four doors before she reached the mahogany and brass portal to the executive suite. Harry, the security guard, tipped his uniform hat to her and leaned into one of the doors. It opened with a whoosh; top management was hermetically isolated from the rest of the office.

"Morning, Ms. Cuneen." Kate was in her fifties, an old-school secretary who could not be induced to call her boss by her first name. "The *Growth* presentation has been pushed back to nine-thirty. Mr. Hamilton called, said he'd call back this afternoon. And there are flowers."

"Flowers?"

"Yes, ma'am." Kate wore her bifocals on the tip of her nose. She gazed over the rims at Nell with studied disinterest. "Would you like your coffee now, Ms. Cuneen?"

There were half a dozen yellow roses wrapped in green foil. She fumbled with the attached card, suddenly giddy with the absurd hope that they were from Serge. The card said, "Looking forward to Thursday." It was unsigned.

"Damn you, Massinger." If he was going to be so circumspect, why bother sending flowers at all? And now there was the problem of what to do with them. She did not have to ask herself whether any of the men of executive row would display cut roses in their offices. She punched at the intercom. "Would you bring my coat in here, Kate?"

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When Kate came in, Nell pushed the flowers to the edge of the desk. "Wrap these in the coat and take them out to my car, would you?" She began opening her mail. "Bring the coat back."

"Would you like me to put them in water?"

"No, don't bother."

Nell spent most of the morning in an excruciating meeting. Bob Yamoto presented a mock-up of the summer issue of *Growth*, NoreasCorp's stockholder magazine. Yamoto was a competent writer and editor, but Nell had never liked the man; he seemed to believe everything the company told him to print. Carruthers sat in on the first half hour of the meeting while Yamoto summarized the articles and displayed the photographs and graphics he had selected. Nell wondered what Carruthers thought of Yamoto. She had never been able to discover her boss's opinion of anyone.

Leon Carruthers was of the hearty handshake, don't-bother-me-with-the-facts school of management. He knew at least one thing about every employee he had ever met. If Smith's son were a Little League star then Carruthers would invariably greet the man with, "Smitty, good to see you. Your kid still hitting them out of the park?" Or if Dubinski's wife dabbled with acrylics it would be, "Phil, how are you? The Mrs.? She still painting?" It mattered little that Smith's boy had long since given up baseball for punk rock or that the Dubinskis had been separated for a year and a half.

Exactly a half hour after Carruthers had entered the conference room, his secretary cracked the door, gained his and everyone else's attention and said, "Sorry to interrupt, but Madrid is on the phone." All nodded, understanding this hoary ritual of escape. Carruthers excused himself and the actual work of the meeting began.

Now Nell became the star of the meeting and seven people in her public relations group vied for her approval by criticizing the mock-up. The comments were generally favorable about the profile of the pulpwood stacker in the Bangor plant who was a volunteer "smoke jumper" — a skydiving firefighter. However, they all took turns attacking the article on the joint venture between NoreasCorp's building products division and a prefab home builder to make mobile solar homes.

Nell wished there were a window in the conference room so that she could stare out of it. Nobody read *Growth*. They mailed out 17,000 of the damn things and 16,500 were garbage within an hour of delivery. She sorted idly through the photography on the smoke jumper while the others gabbled. There was a close-up of the grinning hero, his face smudged with soot, an aerial of a forest fire, and a family portrait. Mr. and Mrs. Smoke Jumper and their daughter, wearing orange jumpsuits and parachutes, stood in front of a twin-engine Cessna. Nell

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scanned the article again; the little girl was only eight. What a stupid thing to teach your only child.

All through labor, Serge and Nell argued about what to name the baby. The decision was doubly complicated because the prospective parents had different last names and both agreed that the baby should be neither Cuneen nor Lucier. Finally, when the contractions were coming ten minutes apart, they reached a compromise founded on mutual exhaustion: they would name the girl after her birthday, Avril LeHuit, and they would talk again if they had a boy.

Avril was the child every parent hopes for. Beautiful: hair as pale as corn silk, blue eyes, a bloom of color on her cheeks. Intelligent: she could count ten jelly beans before her second birthday and she noticed many things that adults were at pains to hide. Cheerful: she was a bubbly, smiling child, enthralled with her life. Of course, she resisted toilet training until she was almost four and she loved to pull cats' tails and she was not above pinching a stubborn playmate, but these flaws seemed trivial to her doting parents.

Nell went back to NoreasCorp six weeks after Avril's birth. Serge enjoyed staying home with his daughter. In the two days before she was born he had nearly burned himself out writing four potboilers about a sexist adventurer called The Mercenary. He worked part time as a reviewer for the *Stamford Advocate* and produced an occasional lapidary short story which he wasted on the mystery magazines. He took Nell out to celebrate the day his agent dropped him.

They lived in a converted barn at the top of a stony bluff. Two of their seven acres were nearly vertical. When the leaves were off the trees they could see Long Island Sound glistening on the horizon. They could not see their nearest neighbors through the trees. When Nell was promoted to Assistant Vice President for Corporate Communications she became the highest-ranking woman in NoreasCorp. Serge started what he called a serious novel when Avril started nursery school. They were happy.

It ended on a Saturday. Serge was writing in his loft. Nell and Avril were swimming in their modest pear-shaped pool. The poolside phone rang and Nell hurried to answer it before Serge was disturbed. It was Carruthers himself.

"Sorry to disturb you, Nell, but we've got a problem up at the Polymex plant. There was a spill, some chemicals found their way into a floor drain which empties eventually into the Merrimack River. The plant manager panicked and called the state before he called us; I guess some of the cities up there draw their drinking water from the river. Anyway, I've got reporters from the wire services and the *Boston Globe* calling and I need a statement.

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Get your people on it and get back to me by two-thirty. Benelli is the plant manager's name. Make sure that idiot keeps his mouth shut. Thanks, Nell. Appreciate it."

Nell pulled Avril from the pool, ushered her out of the chain link enclosure and locked the gate. "Why don't you come inside and play for a while, honey? Mommy has to make some phone calls."

"No, Mommy. I wanna be out."

"All right." Nell aimed her daughter at the swings and sandbox and gave her a gentle pat on the rear. "But you stay in the yard, you hear?"

Nell loved a challenge, especially when it came from the president of the company. She sent Manning, her slickest press handler, to the plant and had the skittish Benelli and his family check into a motel at the company's expense. Then she marshaled the rest of her staff. Soon they had lined up three experts who were willing to say that the spill posed no hazard at any time to anyone anywhere. The statement was a masterpiece of guiltless regret. Public relations was the one thing Nell did exceptionally well in life. For an hour and a half a crisis had demanded her complete and undivided attention; like a true professional she had given it.

But there was no excuse.

When she arrived at Massinger's condominium on Thursday, Nell was not sure whether she wanted to make love to the man or scratch the grin off his smug face. Massinger did not give her the chance to make up her mind. He offered no target as he mixed a pitcher of vodka martinis; for the time being he was as bland as his home. A minimalist architect had done the interior. It was airy and white and strangely empty, like a blank piece of paper. There was not a splinter of wood nor were there walls, not even in the bathroom. The modest could conceal themselves behind a folding gray vinyl screen.

Massinger's favorite topic was food. He was a convert to *nouvelle cuisine* and a lifelong devotee of Szechwan cooking. He could spend an entire evening rating the local restaurants. Tonight, he promised, they would go to Antonio's, a new place which had opened near Greenwich Point. Nell nodded abstractedly and held out her glass for a refill.

They dined on *fettuccine al pesto, braciole ripine,* and a bottle of *'77 Brunello di Montalcino Riserva.* The waiter fawned over them. The view was of $20 million worth of yachts twitching idly at their moorings. While they sipped espresso a piano player in a maroon tuxedo sat down at the Bösendorfer to improvise on Gershwin. A perfect evening; Nell told herself that there must be millions of women who would spend their dreary lives lusting for an evening like this. The more she thought about it the more numb she felt.

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Massinger's arm brushed gently against her breast as he helped her with her coat. Later, he was not so gentle. When he was aroused her clothes seemed to baffle him; in his impatience he broke the snap as he tried to unzip her dress. A small mishap, but it was one which slowly consumed her ambivalence and released her rage. He talked too much as he caressed her. The word "love" came too easily to his lips, especially since he never used it when she was dressed. At the end he always grunted — oh, the great psychiatrist could grunt like a pig at feed.

When he had finished she sat up and turned on the light. There was a decanter of cognac on the nightstand; she poured herself some and swirled it in the snifter. "Otis." Her stomach lurched as if she were going to be sick. "When you got your license, did they make you sign anything?"

"License?" said Massinger dreamily. "Driver's license? Fishing license?"

"Medical license, your license to be a psychiatrist. I mean there must have been something written down, a code of ethics." She felt him tense and push away from her.

"What are you talking about, Nell?"

"Isn't it against your professional ethics to sleep with me? Didn't they make you sign something that said 'I, Otis Massinger, hereby promise not to screw my patients.' "

He shivered but then managed the weak smile of a man who has been observed biting into a wormy apple. "Nell, is this another joke? You mean so much more to me ... I can't believe...."

"Here." She offered him the snifter. "Have a drink while you think of something safe to say." When he accepted the glass, she thrust the blankets from her and swung out of his bed. She pulled her dress from its hanger and slithered into it.

"I don't understand this, Nell. What's the matter?"

"Let's just say that you're a lousy lover, Otis. Let's leave it at that." She stepped into her shoes.

Massinger heaved himself out of the bed. "Nell, you stop it right now. I want you to sit down and talk to me."

"You're not giving me orders, Doctor." She picked up her coat and purse. "You're not even wearing any clothes."

He grabbed his pants and gathered her underwear and panty hose, which were scattered across the floor. "Wait! What about these?"

Nell laughed. "Mail them to me." She slammed the door behind her.

On the way home she shattered speed limits euphorically, ignored lights and lane markers. She tuned the stereo in her BMW to an oldies station, turned it up and sang along incoherently, making up the words when memory failed her. She chuckled at the disc jockey's jokes, blew raspberries at the commercials. Gallons of pricey liquor, hours of determined sex, the daily exercise of power — none of these had

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ever satified Nell as deeply as walking out on Massinger.

They were waiting for her in the living room. Unblinking button eyes stared into the darkness. Nell did not see them immediately; she went into the kitchen and consumed two stacks of fig newtons and an enormous glass of milk, like a teenager home from a bowling date. Despite the hour her mood seemed unshakable. She was on her way to play her scratchy Supremes records when she discovered the doll party.

They lounged on the sofa, gazing absently at the pink plastic place settings arranged on the coffee table. There was a doll that winked and a doll that bleated, a rag doll and a black doll, and a doll with realistic sex parts. All of them were smiling dolls.

"Oh, my god," said Nell.

The dolls seemed to be smiling at some secret joke — perhaps one told at her expense.

"I'm going crazy." She hugged herself.

She expected one of them to acknowledge her, to stand up on its short legs and explain that she was indeed having a psychotic hallucination, that her skull had cracked like the shell of a dropped egg and her sanity was leaking out onto the rug, that soon some people with soft voices would come to take care of her and that she would never have to worry or think again. She waited. The dolls smiled.

Finally she stumbled upstairs to the newly installed speaker phone and called her psychiatrist.

When Nell turned the key in the ignition the next morning, the car radio throbbed with the Beatles. "Yeah, yeah, *yeah*," she said, stabbing at the select button. She located the classical station, turned it down to a murmur, and drove off.

For all his faults, Massinger was the only person in the world who cared for her. He had come swiftly and without reproach to rescue her from her hysteria. He told her that she had organized the doll party and then blocked out the memory. To make it seem as if Avril was still alive, he explained. She wondered if she were being unreasonable in her expectations of the man. After all, she had seduced him.

Downtown Stamford was clogged with morning traffic. As was her custom, Nell twisted the rearview mirror and applied her workaday makeup as she crept towards NoreasCorp. There was little she could do with the accordian pleats at the corners of her eyes but she lightened the pouches underneath. With quick and sure strokes she dabbed on peach-colored lipstick. She brushed her hair furiously and pulled it back into a tighter-than-usual bun. Better in her position to be considered handsome than beautiful.

She felt much better once she was behind her desk. Despite its complexity, the world of business was wonder-

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fully comforting. It presented no madness, no tragedy, no corpses, only problems which could either be solved or foisted on someone else. She spent much of the morning looking for work to take home with her that weekend. At ten-thirty Carruthers entered her office unannounced and invited her to lunch.

Despite her success, Nell had never been socially accepted at NoreasCorp. Boy talk was not one of her specialties; she found baseball and basketball dull, football and hockey appalling. Since she was not directly involved in one of NoreasCorp's profit centers, she could discuss the business only in the most general terms. Liquor tended to still her tongue, cigars nauseated her. Gender was, of course, her biggest problem; she sensed her gentlemanly peers reining in their language and attitudes in her presence. No one ever told her dirty jokes.

Carruthers, who was similarly isolated by position and personality, might well have become a friend — except that Carruthers was a mystery. He and Nell dined alone in a corner of the small executive dining room. They talked awkwardly of property taxes, state politics, and the end of the skiing season. He dawdled through his salad as if postponing a trip to the dentist.

"You know, Nell, we're all proud of the job you're doing for the company."

There was a spot of dressing on his tie; Nell resisted a crazy impulse to flick it away with her fingernail.

"Especially in light of the personal problems you've had to deal with." He contemplated his fork for a moment, then laid it across his plate. "Frankly, Nell, I doubt that any of our top people could have borne the strain you have. But even the strongest of us has a breaking point. It has come to my attention that you haven't taken a day off since 1978. You've accrued nearly three months of vacation time, Nell."

She folded and refolded her napkin; she could not think of a reply.

"I want you to take a rest, Nell. No reflection on your current performance. But you look tired. You act tired. I say that as a friend, believe me. And as your boss I'm afraid that somewhere down the line I might lose one of my most valuable...."

Nell stopped listening. A bead of sweat dribbled from under her arm. She was hot. It had been hot that Saturday, eight months ago. She remembered they had been swimming. Carruthers had not given a good goddamn about her days off then. She remembered when she told Serge that she thought he was watching Avril. That wild — yes, murderous — look on his face. They scrambled through the dog-day heat, searching. Across lawns, through the thicket, down the cliffs. Tears and sweat stung her eyes. It had been a terrible price they had paid for a view of the Sound: at the bottom of a twenty-foot drop, head cocked to one

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side like a broken doll....

"I appreciate your concern, Leon. But I have ongoing projects. I just can't leave them hanging."

He reached across the table and closed his hand over her wrist. It felt like a handshake. "One of the perks of being president, Nell, is that you don't have to take no for an answer." He smiled. "I'm sending a memo to your group. Your vacation starts Monday the eighth, and I want you to take at least a month, you understand? Don't worry, we'll find some way to muddle through without you." He released her and pushed away from the table. "Get some sun, go skiing, enjoy yourself. And don't misunderstand me, Nell. There will still be a job for you when you get back."

Nell could not remember much of the weekend; she spent most of it destroying brain cells to the clinking accompaniment of ice cubes diving into Cutty Sark.

"But what job will it be?" she screamed into her back yard early Saturday morning, too late for Carruthers or her comfortably distant neighbors to hear.

She ate some pills. She went to the Grand Union without her pocketbook, piled $97.33 worth of groceries into a shopping cart, and was then forced to flee from a livid cashier. Among the things she broke were three Waterford crystal wineglasses, a lamp, a ceramic flower pot, two fingernails, and a mirror — when she saw herself in it on Sunday afternoon. She built a fire in the fireplace out of alphabet blocks. She threw up three times, once on the rug in the bedroom.

On Monday she rested. She was simply too weak to continue her self-torture and she did not want to desecrate this special day. She showered and dressed for work, but instead of getting into the car she took two more pills and settled in front of the television set to wait for Julieta.

Julieta was a forklift of a woman: plain, squat, and powerful. She wore discount jeans and a faded velour top which rode up her back when she bent over, revealing a quarter-inch of pink panties and a roll of pale flab. Serge had hired Julieta a year ago; after one look at her, Nell's jealousy had evaporated. The only thing she disliked about the woman was her persistence in calling Nell "Mrs." no matter how often she was corrected.

Nell seemed to make Julieta nervous. Every time the cleaning woman passed her employer she made a supreme effort not to stare; when she was working out of sight she made enough noise for a platoon of servants. She was obviously chagrined when Nell joined her in the kitchen at noon. Nell smiled grittily; she was determined to talk to someone about anything.

Julieta was eating a slab of cold meat loaf in a pita shell. Except for odds and ends, Nell was completely out of food; she finally decided on

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brie and stale Triscuits.

"You want something to drink?" Nell would have been glad to open the bar.

"I got water, Mrs."

Nell hesitated, then poured a jigger of scotch into a glass of Perrier and sat across the butcher block table from her cleaning woman.

Julieta steadfastly refused all Nell's conversational gambits: commendations, television chat, weather complaints. She ate quickly, brushed the crumbs from the table onto her hand, and then reached for Nell's empty plate.

"Julieta!"

She pulled away from Nell; her face hardened with suspicion. "You wanna lay me off, Mrs.? That why you waiting around here?"

"Lay you off? No, Julieta, no. I'm home because ... because I'm on vacation. It so happens I am going away next week...." Nell found herself babbling in embarrassment. "...so I won't need you then, but the week after that you just come ahead, just like usual. No, you're doing a fine job, just great. I didn't mean to upset you, Julieta. I just wanted to get to know you a little better, that's all."

Julieta glanced at the clock, still frowning. "It's twelve-thirty, Mrs. I take a half hour. And I can't stay late because I gotta pick up my boy Joey after school."

Nell nodded wearily and waved her out of the room. The woman would rather clean toilets than talk to her. She wobbled upstairs to take a nap.

April eight."

Nell bolted awake, then realized that she herself had murmured the words she had been trying all day to escape. The clock-radio said 3:36; Julieta was gone. Nell washed her face with cold water and decided to skip her four o'clock appointment with Massinger. She felt strong enough now to seek a permanent cure for her distress.

She went down the hall to Avril's room and searched for the Little Sally Bake Set. She brought the miniature baking pan and the small, stale box of Little Sally Chocolate Cake Mix down to the kitchen. She preheated the oven to 350°.

When it was cooked, she spread on coconut frosting. Avril's favorite. There were no candles so she stuck six kitchen matches into the cake. The phone rang.

"Go away, Otis." It rang again and again, insisting, intruding. "Leave me alone, damn it!"

Massinger's pills reminded her of the penny candy she used to buy at the drugstore on Summer Street in South Bend. She dumped them onto the butcher block table and counted. Fourteen. She imagined it would be like running down the sand dunes to Lake Michigan; hurtling out of control over hot sand, the illusion of flight, a final chilling plunge. She arranged the pills

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in a star pattern on the top of the cake and lit the match candles.

"Happy birthday to you.

Happy birthday to you,"

She began to cry — the first time since the funeral — but her voice was steady.

"Happy birthday, dear Avril,

Happy birthday to you."

The phone rang again, its jangle strangely distant. Cursing, she reached to disconnect the speaker phone. There was no need: it was silent. *Bring-ring, bring ring.* The sound summoned her upstairs. Down the hall. To Avril's room.

In the middle of the floor was a toy telephone. It had a red receiver and blue wheels and a yellow pull string. There was a smiling face painted on the front; blue eyes jiggled in plastic sockets when the wheels turned. The phone looked up at her and rang again.

Trembling with the conviction that she had slipped irretrievably into madness, she stooped to pick up the receiver.

"Mommy?" Avril's voice came not from the phone but from the throbbing of blood in Nell's body, the mutter of her heart. "I ran too far, Mommy. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Avril!"

"Don't hurt yourself, Mommy. I cry for you. Please stop hurting."

Nell's voice failed.

"I have to go away now. Don't stay here anymore, Mommy. You need hugs and kisses."

"Honey Avril, I can't leave you...."

"I love you, Mommy. But I have to go."

Nell crouched in the gathering darkness of her daughter's room and learned to cry. She had always thought that crying was only a kind of pain, and so she had tried to divorce it from her sorrow. Sobbing, she realized that tears did not wound.

In time she folded Avril's phone to her breast, carried it to her bedroom, and started packing.

Coming soon

Next month: "The World of Pez Pavilion," an astonishing time travel story by **George Alec Effinger.** Also: "The Odd Darkness" by **Pamela Sargent** and "The Monkey Treatment" by **George R. R. Martin.**

Watch for the July issue, on sale June 2.

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Letters

An academic responds to Budrys

As co-editor of *Bridges to Fantasy* and organizer of the Eaton Conference that produced it, I feel compelled to respond to the "review" of the book in the January 1983 *F&SF* by Algis Budrys. I do so because his remarks are really not about the book at all. He not only misrepresents the collection, but uses it openly as a pretext to clobber academics in general who study science fiction and fantasy. This surely explains the many references to baseball and batting throughout his piece. In dealing with *Bridges*, however, Budrys fouls out.

Let me take up, first of all, his indictment of the book. He finds the writing murky, unreadable. The essays, he claims, deal with secondary and tertiary matters, refer incestuously to other academic concepts rather than to the primary texts. And, even in this own little derivative world of theirs, the academics still get their facts wrong.

Budrys singles out the introductory paragraph of the book as mannered because it "foregoes the use of the definite and indefinite article in English prose." We should not forget however that academics are not paid by the word. He then battens on a reference in Harold Bloom's essay to "the Gnostic Valentinus and Joachim of Flora" as hopelessly obscure. Granted, these names are not exactly household words. But neither in many academic households is a name like David Lindsay, the subject of this essay. Bloom implies that we can learn by reading Joachim of Flora, *and* by reading David Lindsay, and that we can learn even more by learning to read them together. This is what good criticism is, the risk of making surprising yet meaningful comparisons. It is not, as Budrys asserts, simply a matter of getting our 3X5 cards stuck together. The critic assumes his reader, after he makes such a comparison, might take the time to go and take a look at the works compared. Budrys' attitude, however, is a bit like that of the student (alas all too common today) who cries out in protest when he comes across a word he doesn't understand: "But why *should* I look it up?"

Out of 13 essays in *Bridges*, George Guffey's alone is singled out for extensive comment. But here Budrys distorts Guffey's intention, which is certainly not to berate the pulps or works of the Golden Age. Guffey addresses a specific problem — the transformation of themes and images in Bradbury and Lem — in order to speculate on the processess by which fantasy is created. This is the way of an analytical essay. And in that essay, not only are Guffey's facts about the genesis of *Martian Chronicles* correct (contrary to what Budrys claims) but Guffey is willing to consider that genesis the work of a creative mind. Budrys on the other hand sees this collection as something merely "cobbled" together, precipitated in large part by an agent's attempt to "wrangle" a contract from Doubleday. Indeed, Budrys would wrangle with Guffey to the point of even challenging his distinction between Bradbury and Lem on the grounds of scientific rigor or lack of it. Yet one must admit there is quite a dif-

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ference, in terms of scientific awareness, between these two writers. And, unless Mars really is heaven, helicopters would not be able to fly on it. This does not mean (as Budrys seems to fear) that Bradbury is somehow a "lesser" writer, simply that he is doing something different.

As I have said before however, the particular merits or demerits of this particular book are not the real issue for Budrys. The book is an excuse for a general attack on academics who teach and write about science fiction and fantasy. In this attack Budrys comes across, somewhat surprisingly, as a new Howard Jarvis, asking university courses on F&SF across the nation to stand up and account for their tax dollars at the bar of the common readership. He questions the dollars-and-cents "worth" of such courses by finding their teachers (on evidence summoned from *Bridges* which amounts to non-evidence) both incompetent and opportunistic. Most of these academics, he claims, are people who couldn't succeed in a traditional specialty because they lack either the talent or the will to do so. So they saved their hides by embracing SF.

Such an argument however cannot be based on the people associated with *Bridges*. The scholars and critics writing there already have solid reputations in both or all of their fields, including that of science fiction and fantasy criticism. Quite the opposite of being opportunistic, many of them actually had to stick their necks out in order to profess these forms of literature which they felt were both important and neglected by the academy. There remains strong resistence to science fiction and fantasy, and just as many music departments will not recognize modern classical music let alone jazz, so for many English professors modern literature stopped with T.S. Eliot. In this context, Budrys sounds, oddly enough, like many a "basic books" hardliner I have heard in faculty meetings.

Budrys' line of reasoning is strange then because, in order to put down the academics who do write on science fiction and fantasy, he is obliged to invoke the old elitist standards that pushed this literature into its so-called "ghetto" in the first place. For after the tax-cutter's knife has pared away all us boondogglers, what remains but the old "traditional" disciplines, their authority and ability to scorn the "popular' literatures more intact than ever.

Beyond setting the record straight however, I would like to call for a truce. For I see equally unreasoned attacks arising on both sides, and academic hatchetmen are being summoned to denounce, in *their* magazines, science fiction and fantasy in the same manner that Budrys has denounced academics in these pages. A sad consequance of these sad times perhaps, when people and groups must vie for their place in the sun. But avoidable. Budrys does harm by addressing his readers — "*F&SF* readers" — as a special-interest group. For it, as we all seem to believe, science fiction and fantasy are literatures for all readers, then we should cross our disciplinary boundaries and arbitrary battle-lines and join hands to prove it.

George Slusser
UC Riverside

A recipe for reading

I have followed with some interest the continuing debate within F&SF's letter column on the apparent decline in that subspecies of man: Homo

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reader. But it was Kathy Romer's letter in your February issue which has finally motivated me to add my own thoughts.

As it happens, both myself and my younger brother are not only readers, but voracious readers of SF, although only I regularly read the magazines or may be considered a fan. However, this happy state of affairs came about not through any inherent superiority on the part of ourselves (shucks), and certainly not because of our schooling, but was at least in part the result of a premeditated plan of action initiated by our parents. They — may any gods bless them — discovered the long sought *Secret!*

And what is this wonderful Secret?

It was an elegantly simple experiment, in the best tradition of the scientific method: limit our television to one hour per day. This accomplished two important things. First it kept us from watching passively. We had to actively choose what we wished to watch. And if we chose to waste our hour on "I Love Lucy" or the like, then when "Star Trek" came along we were out of luck. Eventually, we learned to hold out for "Star Trek." The only exception to this rule was in the case of a film. If we began one we were allowed to finish it. Since the literary qualities of films are by and large somewhat above that of the general fare, this sets at least a slight premium on quality.

Secondly, this rule left us with lots of time with nothing to do. And, both our parents being teachers, there were always plenty of books about the house...

There were of course problems. perhaps the most obvious is that of how to keep your children from cheating. Our parents relied upon our basic honesty — and, of course, we cheated. But watching television is not much fun when one has to watch the door for an inevitable appearance during the best part, and even less fun when one feels guilty. Needless to say, all this must be even harder on the parent than it is on the child. All I can say is if it works, your children will thank you for it.

However, there is another problem for parents who would have reading children, a problem which has nothing to do with television. Anyone who has recently attended either Grammar or High School and attempted to read therein will have noticed they are hardly set up for it. In fact, you can't. Let me repeat that: when I went to school I was not allowed to read! Whenever I tried to, I was told — by the teachers no less — that reading was not good for me. If I wished to grow up healthy I must go out and play (usually football, for God's sake). I firmly believe that *enforced* "playtime" is second only to television in the decline of education in this country. (I emphasize "enforced" because I do recognize that every healthy child needs to play. But I also recognize that reading can be a very important part of that play, and that very few children need to be *forced* to obtain sufficient play; just the opposite!)

One final point needs to be raised, and fair warning, this is heresy. Readers are in fact a subspecies. There really do exist people who, whatever the quantity of quality of their education, are not and cannot be readers. SF fans of all people should be aware that not all people are the same, or think in the same ways. Reading is a very specialized activity. It is as if we decided to make every person, say, a carpenter. Some would be great carpenters, most would be indifferent capenters, and

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some would never learn at all. But in no way could *everyone* be made to become a great carpenter.

I have a musician friend who is at least as intelligent as I, is capable of reading as well — probably better, I am a very slow reader — yet doesn't. He reads music like I read books, so the skills and equipment are there. His education is every bit as technical and extensive as mine, only in music rather than science. His hobby is as complex; garage-based engineering rather than SF. In short, he is entirely human, but he does not read. And never will.

I suspect there are a lot of similar people.

Donald F. Robertson.
Sacramento, CA

We have several letters to forward to ANGELA SAVATIEL of Louisville, KY, who had a letter in our February issue. Unfortunately we no longer have her complete address. Angela, if you're out there, will you send us your address?

Pervading cynicism?

Your magazine is becoming more and more a "horror" sheet and less and less a "fantasy" publication. There seems to be a pervading cynicism taking over. What has become of the upbeat attitude that used to permeate your stories?

You reached new lows in the March issue with the disgusting "Where Did You Get My Number?" by Harvey Jacobs. This piece of tripe is nothing more than an amateurish rehash of the old "go ahead and rape em boys, they really like it" theme of magazines whose names aren't worthy of citation.

I believe in life and the future. Let's see more stories whose major theme is that working together we can make a better future. If you continue on your present course I will have no choice but to cancel my subscription.

An editorial apology to all your feminine readers for the publication of "Where Did You Get My Number?" would also be advisable.

Joy Nocito Alber
Summerville, S.C.

Good investment

A while back I bought a lifetime subscription to F&SF. I'm just writing to let you know that with each new issue I'm more pleased with my investment. May you have a long and healthy and prosperous future.

Henry Kline II
Hollywood, CA

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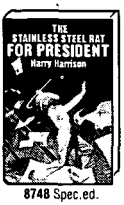

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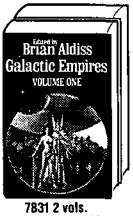

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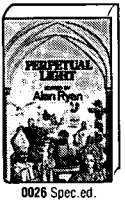

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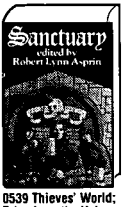

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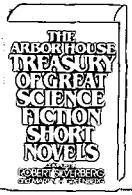

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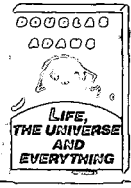

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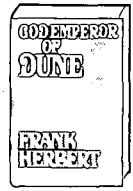

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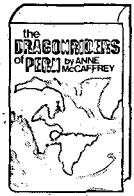

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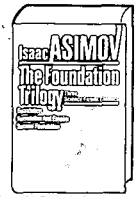

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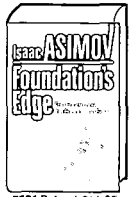

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